

## **Zechariah 7:1-7 *Who is it for?***

The next 2 chapters we have reached in the book of Zechariah contain some of the most powerful and searching and helpful material for us to face as we begin a new year together as a church. I hope you'll pay careful attention and that you'll pray that we will humbly hear God's voice as he speaks to us in his Word.

(If you're not a Christian, the questions are as potent and as pointed; I really hope you'll find it helpful to work through this material with us)

A delegation arrives from Bethel to ask the priest and prophets a question about worship. The question concerns fasting at certain times in the year - should they carry on fasting in the 5th month as they had done since their exile to Babylon?

This was a fast they instituted to remember and to mourn the destruction of the temple (which was now being rebuilt). They also fasted in other months, to recall the killing of the King and the deportation of the people and other significant moments in their collective history.

They want to know, from God, if they should continue to do so *now*. These were fasts they had chosen to keep; they weren't part of his instruction to them. And now that the exile is well and truly over and the temple is being rebuilt....well, is it time to stop fasting in those months?

The answer comes in 4 parts, marked by the phrase, The word of the LORD came... (in 7:4, 7:8, 8:1 and 8:18). We'll look at the answers over these next weeks, beginning with the first one today. Before we get to the substance of the first reply, I want to make a few related observations:

**1. This is 2 years after the night visions** - time given to process what the LORD has said. We need to make sure we do, too, and not just rush

from sermon to sermon, Sunday to Sunday. Take time to think, to pray, to properly engage with his word to us.

## **2. It's ok, even important, to ask questions**

This reminds us that questions about what we do and why we do so are not inappropriate; far from it. It is wise to do so. We need to ask what is appropriate, in gospel terms, for our time and circumstances; we need to be pro-active in asking such questions, not simply react when forced to do so.

The reality is that things that may have been helpful and appropriate before may no longer be so *now*. And to hold onto them in that case is not a mark of spiritual maturity but of stubborn sentimentality. It is not courageous to cling to traditions beyond their usefulness, it is cowardly, since it is about what we find comforting and familiar.

A new year might be a good time to ask ourselves some questions.

## **3. How long to sorrow over sin?**

Implicit in their question is the issue of how long is it right for us to sorrow over our sin? After all, the exile may be over but the political and social context is nothing like it once was: notice the name of the month, Kislev - that's its Babylonian name, a sign that although they were not in physical exile, yet still aspects of exile persisted.

That question isn't going to be explicitly answered for a while yet in these chapters but I want to highlight it here, in passing, because it's worth thinking about and keeping in mind as we move through these chapters. Are we to go on sorrowing over past sin if we can still feel its impact upon us and others? Or are there times to move forward? I hope you'll see that that is an important question they're raising and one we'll find helpful to face ourselves with in these next weeks.

OK, let's come to the first part of the LORD's response:

### **Ground-zero: who is it for?**

So they ask their question but no answer is given, not until the end of chapter 8. Instead, the LORD addresses *them* with questions, questions that will take them (and us) deeper into even more pressing matters. Who were they actually fasting and mourning for? Who did they feast for? And doesn't the past teach them about such things?

His assessment of their fasting (and their feasting) is this: *they had done it not for him but for themselves.*

But how can fasting not be for the Lord - after all, they hardly benefit from it! Actually, fasting can be about all sorts of other things, as can various forms of service:

- it can be about self-pity, which is essentially self-serving;
- it can be about our reputation with others;
- it can be about looking to secure God's blessing in a mechanistic, *quid pro quo* way;

So the question is a vital and necessary one to face: *who is it for?*

The Lord's own answer is that it ought to be for him - as should their feasting, as should all enjoyment of his gifts. But why does he want it to be for him - what does he get from it? How is he made richer or benefited by it?

Well, he isn't. He's neither richer when we serve him nor poorer when we don't - he doesn't need anything. He is perfectly happy in himself and perfectly secure. No, the point he's making is not so much about his needs but theirs: does their fasting - or their feasting, or their temple-building or whatever they're working on - does it spring from a living, vibrant relationship with him that isn't about negotiating a deal with him but is a delighted response to undeserved favour and mercy.

This has to be ground zero for us, because there is no point in asking strategic questions about our life and ministry as a church unless we're doing it for the Lord - not to impress him, nor to engineer his blessing or prevent his discipline, but simply and truly as reverence and worship, as an expression of gratitude and an eagerness to see him known and rejoiced in by others.

*This is the stripped-back version; this is the essential reality.* Nothing could be more important for us to face as we look into the year ahead.

But what do we need to make sure we approach things in this way? We need each other's encouragement and example, that's for sure. Even more, we need a vision of God himself that is true to his character and ways...to see him as utterly beautiful and worthy, full of grace and truth.

Can I suggest that if you're not a Christian, this is also the most pressing, urgent and important question you need to face. Where is your life going? What is it all for? Will it ever add-up to something meaningful and satisfying? Those only truly come from knowing that your life is held securely in unwavering love and kindness, that someone has power to shield you and rescue you and has love enough to pardon and forgive you.

You will only find that power and love in Jesus, the very face of this God - a God full of generosity and the embodiment of all that is true.

Will you take him at his word, that all who trust in him are accepted and adopted?