

The Visions to Zechariah Zechariah 7:1 - 7

Lesson 3

Should We Fast

Zechariah 7:¹ In the fourth year of King Darius, the word of the Lord came to Zechariah on the fourth *day* of the ninth month, *which is* Chislev. ² Now *the town of* Bethel had sent Sharezer and Regemmelech and their men to seek the favor of the Lord, ³ speaking to the priests who belong to the house of the Lord of hosts, and to the prophets, saying, "Shall I weep in the fifth month and abstain, as I have done these 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 these seventy years, was it actually for Me that you fasted? ⁶ 'When you eat and drink, do you not eat for yourselves and do you not drink for yourselves? ⁷ 'Are not *these* the words which the Lord proclaimed by the former prophets, when Jerusalem was inhabited and prosperous along with its cities around it, and the Negev and the foothills were inhabited?'"

Two years had passed and it was the night of December 7, 518 BC when Zechariah received four visions in response to the question of the Bethelites, "Shall I weep in the fifth month and abstain, as I have done these many years?" Although Bethel was just 12 miles north of Jerusalem, it was in the Northern Kingdom and had become the center of false worship. ⁸ Two of the men's names were given, Sharezer and Regemmelech. Both were Assyrian names, not Jewish; however, they were probably of mixed blood. Why were they fasting in the fifth month in the first place? The temple had been destroyed, literally burned to the ground by Nebuchadnezzar on the 10th day of the fifth month of 586 BC.⁹ Josephus recorded that the destruction occurred on Sunday, August 4, 586 BC. ¹⁰ The Jews instituted a self-imposed fast in the fifth month of every year to commemorate its destruction. However, it was a man made ritual, a human institution, not a commandment of the Lord. The men were asking the priests if this fast should be continued because the temple was about three-quarters complete. Even though the temple was more than two years from being dedicated, the priests were still bound to make decisions concerning the law on its various points. This question was not a point of law, but it had become so important that they considered it to be so.

The Day of Atonement always occurs on the 10th of Tishri, the seventh month of the Hebrew Calendar. At some point, the Jews turned that day into a time of fasting, but it was not part of the Lord's instruction for the day. ¹¹ The Lord includes this day in His answer to Zechariah. Some scholars try to associate the fast of the seventh month with commemoration of the death of Gedaliah, the man Nebuchadnezzar installed as governor of Judah when he removed Zedekiah, the last king of the Southern Kingdom. Gedaliah was not faithful to Nebuchadnezzar, so he had him killed and no one was put in his place. The Jews did establish a fasting day in his honor but it was a human institution too, not one

⁸ 1 Kings 12:28-29; 13:1; and Amos 7:13

⁹ 2 Kings 25:8-10

¹⁰ The new year, Nisan/Abib 1 occurred on Tuesday, February 28th, 586 BC, causing the majority of the fifth month of the year (Av or Ab) to occur in August.

¹¹ Lev 16:3-10; Lev 23:26-32; and Num 29:7-11

directed by God.¹² It just seems to make sense that the Lord wanted to return the Jews to the proper method of celebrating the Day of Atonement instead of addressing the mourning of the death of Gedaliah. The Old Testament does not contain a single instance where the Lord instructs the Jews to fast.

The Lord's answer was aggressive and not without precedent. The fasts of both the fifth and the seventh months were self-gratifying and hypocritical forms of worship. They did not do it for God; they did it for themselves and God was angry with them. Three-hundred years earlier, long before the exile, the Lord said the same thing to them concerning their fasts through Isaiah.

Isaiah 58:³ 'Why have we fasted and You do not see? *Why* have we humbled ourselves and You do not notice?' Behold, on the day of your fast you find *your* desire, And drive hard all your workers. ⁴"Behold, you fast for contention and strife and to strike with a wicked fist. You do not fast like *you do* today to make your voice heard on high. ⁵"Is it a fast like this which I choose, a day for a man to humble himself? Is it for bowing one's head like a reed And for spreading out sackcloth and ashes as a bed? Will you call this a fast, even an acceptable day to the Lord? ⁶"Is this not the fast which I choose, To loosen the bonds of wickedness, To undo the bands of the yoke, And to let the oppressed go free And break every yoke? ⁷"Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry And bring the homeless poor into the house; When you see the naked, to cover him; And not to hide yourself from your own flesh?

The Lord did not want His people to continue their ungodly fasts. He wanted to see them live out their faith by caring for the poor, the needy, the widows and the orphans. They preferred wallowing in their self-absorbed debasement – starving the body which the Lord designed to consume food. ¹³ But they were just as bad with their feasting. In neither case did they participate in these activities for the Lord, and because of that, the Lord neither heard nor answered their prayers. He did not want ritual so He rebuked their fasts. He wanted reality about which He had cautioned them through the prophets of earlier days. ¹⁴ His rebuke was against their empty formalism which was devoid of spiritual reality. The Lord would return to the topic of fasting in the fourth vision of the night in Zechariah 8:18-19.

¹² 2 Kings 25:25-26; Jeremiah 41:1-3

¹³ 1 Corinthians 6:13

¹⁴ Isa. 1:11-17; Hosea 6:6; Amos 5:21-24