

FASTING

This 7th chapter of Zechariah moves on from the night visions that Zechariah had, and the prophet is inspired by God to record lessons to teach in a different way than before.

In this chapter events took place, which presented an opportunity for the nation to be warned by the Prophet. It was two years after the giving of the 8 visions to the people. The rebuilding of the temple was well under way, and the returned exiles as a nation were beginning to prosper.

A group of representatives were sent from the town of Bethel (see NIV, ESV, NET – not from the House of God, as it was not built yet, but Bethel as house of God means) to pray before God, asking if they should still continue to fast in the fifth month. Especially seeing that now they had returned from exile, and were receiving so many blessings, it seemed ungrateful to continue to mourn and lament.

Leading the group were two men Sherezer and Regem-melech. These names may well be titles, as they mean Protector of the King, and Chief Officer of the King (Jewish Virtual Library), titles which appear to have been transliterated into Hebrew. (It is worth noting the similarity with the sons of Sennacherib who murdered him see 2 Kings 19:37 and the possibility of how these names became celebrated in the Hebrew mind) It seems they were officials as they had servants see verse 2. It is likely, as this was an official request.

They had a question to ask. To do so, they wanted first to pray before God.

This was a wonderful display of priorities. How often we are in a quandary or perplexed about something, and we ask counsel of the brothers and sisters, but first we must lay it before God in prayer: Philippians 4: 6-7: *Do not be over anxious about things; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be*



made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

The Question:

Should we continue to weep and lament in the fifth month as we have been doing for so many years?

What were they referring to?

The Jews had added various official fasts to be kept in their religious calendar, whereby the whole nation in exile would keep

these Fasts, as a memorial for certain calamities which had befallen them.

Fasts of Mourning which were instituted:

- Fourth Month - Babylonians breach Jerusalem's wall Jeremiah 52:6-7
- Fifth Month - Temple Destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar 2 Kings 25:8 -9
- Seventh Month - Gedaliah was killed Jeremiah 41:1-2
- Tenth Month – Babylonians lay siege to Jerusalem 2 Kings 25:1

It seemed a bit silly to be keeping a fast to the destruction of the temple, when they had nearly finished building it. It would take them just a couple of years before it was completely rebuilt. So what should they do?

This was the opportunity for Zechariah to present the answer of God.

When you did all that fasting, even for seventy years, did you actually do it for me? Or was it not in fact all to do with self-pity and hypocritical? The fasts that the people had decided to keep, in

addition to the law, were self-imposed, and God never required it, He never asked them to do it.

When they had fasted, and gone without food and drink as a sign of mourning for the calamities that befell them, it was because of their suffering, it was not because of the recognition of their sins and wickedness. It was not because they were repentant. So no, why should they continue such rituals?

Why did they not instead listen to the warnings given by the prophets before all these calamities happened to them, what exactly it was that God had asked them to do. He didn't ask for outward shows of religion, of Fasting and rituals. What He did ask was quite simple.

Instead this is the what he requires, he reveals to the prophet:

Verse 7: Thus speaks the Lord of hosts, saying, Execute true judgment, and shew mercy and compassions every man to his brother: And oppress not the widow, nor the fatherless, the stranger, nor the poor; and let none of you imagine evil against his brother in your heart.

They had been given this instruction, this exhortation many years before, long before the exile, in the days of Isaiah the prophet, who told them exactly what God thought of their Fasts

Isaiah 58: 3-7 Wherefore have we fasted, say they, and thou seest not? wherefore have we afflicted our soul, and thou takest no knowledge? Behold, in the day of your fast ye find pleasure, and exact all your labours. Behold, ye fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness: ye shall not fast as ye do this day, to make your voice to be heard on high. Is it such a fast that I have chosen? a day for a man to afflict his soul? is it to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the Lord? Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? Is it not to

deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh

Boring!



But they forgot such a warning, which led them into the complete mess they were in now, remembering all the calamities, because verse 11-12: *But they refused to hearken, and pulled*

away the shoulder, and stopped their ears, that they should not hear. Yea, they made their hearts as an adamant stone...

No amount of warnings from the prophets, sent in the mercy of God, could make any impression upon their hard hearts. So would they really think that them, going without a bit of food for a few days would make any difference to the mind of God?

So it would happen all over again. Sadly, the prophet Zechariah is informed, that such advice would still be ignored and would ultimately be the cause for the nation being scattered like a whirlwind. The self-pity quickly turns to self-centredness, and then self-obsession. The lesson highlighted here by the prophet cannot be lost on us now. Now, we need telling off, and being warned, but the prophecy of Zechariah, is actually one of encouragement, so such words of warning are rare in this prophecy, and he swiftly follows up with a positive message, so we too must not be discouraged. In answer to these fasts, Zechariah was told to relay another message.

This is a lesson for our next Bible class on Zechariah God willing.

There are a few points we would make about Fasting, as often questions come up about whether we should fast today.

In the Old Testament people used to fast for many different religious reasons. In fact, many pagan religious people fasted as well. But in fact, the nation of Israel were only told to “afflict their souls” just before the Day of Atonement which was a very special feast held once a year on the seventh month, when the nation of Israel were nationally to repent of their sins. You can read this in Leviticus 23:32. The “afflict your souls” would naturally involve fasting, in the process of self affliction, and where they possibly sat around thinking about the past year and what they had done wrong, and how to be better the next year, and to help concentrate and study, they stopped eating. It doesn't say that, so we can only guess.

Nowhere in the Old Testament were the nation of Israel commanded to fast. They were only told not to eat unclean animals, and blood.

However, the nation volunteered to fast, to demonstrate that they had sinned. We can read of this in Judges 20:26, when the nation had sinned and they fasted for a day. Later in 1 Samuel 7:6, they fasted again when they had sinned.

We notice it had become a custom of mourning by the end of 1 Samuel. In chapter 31 they fasted seven days when they got King Saul's body back, and buried him in verse 31.

We first read of an individual fasting when King David's son from Bathsheba was very ill in verse 16. This was his own choice and no one told him to do it. He did it as a sign of repentance and mourning.

However by 1 Kings 21 we find that fasting was used as an outward show, and had become a manmade sign to impress others.

In the New Testament we know that Jesus fasted for 40 days. This was not to obey the law, as there was no law to fulfil, however it was to help him to concentrate and focus on the Atonement that he was to make for the nation. He was fulfilling the law, in that he symbolised the testing of Israel in the desert when they wandered for 40 years. Also, he did this willingly, in order to make the spirit triumph over the flesh.

Jesus knew that other people fasted, but he never told anyone to fast. It was completely voluntary.

He hated fasting being used as an outward show: see Matthew 6:16 – 18, a very important verse on the subject. Also Luke 18:9-12.

It is important to notice that fasting had become a very common and outward show in Israel, at the time of Jesus. We notice that the disciples of John said we and the Pharisees fast often, and they asked Jesus why don't your disciples fast? Jesus disciples did not fast, and Jesus said it was because they had no reason to mourn because Jesus was with them. Read Matthew 9: 14,15.

After Jesus ascended we read of the apostles collectively fasting together, but always connected with prayer – see Acts 13:2 and Acts 14:23. This would have been abstaining from food - not eating until they had completed the reason for their gathering of the ecclesia, so the worship came first and then the meal.

It was clear that some people still fasted, as individuals to help them in their service to God, for example the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 11:27..*in fastings often...*

However there is no command in the New Testament to fast. So there is no command in the whole Bible to fast. Instead God has given food as a blessing.

We are not to look down on people who do not fast:

Romans 14:3 Let not him that eats despise him that eats not; and let not him which eats not judge him that eats: for God hath received him.

Romans 14:6 He that regards the day, regards it unto the Lord; and he that regards not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard it. He that eats, eats to the Lord, for he giveth God thanks; and he that eats not, to the Lord he eats not, and giveth God thanks.

In fact we are to avoid fasting if we think it is pleasing to God, or if we think it makes us a better person , because it does not. It doesn't

change how we are as people, or our characters. If we use it as an outward show, it is a sin.

Notice Colossians 2:20-23. Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the elements of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to laws, (Touch not; taste not; handle not; Which all are to perish with the using;) after the commandments and doctrines of men? Which things have indeed a shew of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body; not in any honour to the satisfying of the flesh.

Here the Apostle is telling us that keeping customs and traditions and thinking that fasting - (taste not) makes us pious and holy we are mistaken.

This is the lesson also highlighted in this 7th chapter of Zechariah.

Brother Terry