

ZECHARIAH

Chapter 7

Justice and Mercy, Not Fasting

In the fourth year of King Darius, the word of the LORD came to Zechariah on the fourth day of the ninth month, the month of Kislev. ²The people of Bethel had sent Sharezer and Regem-Melech, together with their men, to entreat the LORD ³by asking the priests of the house of the LORD Almighty and the prophets, “Should I mourn and fast in the fifth month, as I have done for so many years?” ⁴Then the word of the LORD Almighty came to me: ⁵“Ask all the people of the land and the priests, ‘When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months for the past seventy years, was it really for me that you fasted? ⁶And when you were eating and drinking, were you not just feasting for yourselves? ⁷Are these not the words the LORD proclaimed through the earlier prophets when Jerusalem and its surrounding towns were at rest and prosperous, and the Negev and the western foothills were settled?’” ⁸And the word of the LORD came again to Zechariah: ⁹“This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. ¹⁰Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor. In your hearts do not think evil of each other.’” ¹¹“But they refused to pay attention; stubbornly they turned their backs and stopped up their ears. ¹²They made their hearts as hard as flint and would not listen to the law or to the words that the LORD Almighty had sent by his Spirit through the earlier prophets. So the LORD Almighty was very angry. ¹³”“When I called, they did not listen; so when they called, I would not listen,” says the LORD Almighty. ¹⁴“I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations, where they were strangers. The land was left so desolate behind them that no one could come or go. This is how they made the pleasant land desolate.”

7:1 *fourth year ... fourth day ... ninth month.* Dec. 7, 518 B.C.—not quite two years after the eight night visions. (CSB)

518 BC. Two years had elapsed since the beginning of Zechariah’s ministry and his series of visions (cf 1:1, 7). By this time, the Israelite presence in Jerusalem had been strengthened, the temple was within two years of completion (Ezr 6:15), and the people were settling into a life of some ease and routine (Hg 1:4). (TLSB)

This is roughly to our November/December. (Kretzmann)

7:2 *Bethel* – Bethel, that is, the citizens of this city, sent Sharezer and Regem-melech, the first one evidently having been born in exile and bearing a Chaldean name, with their men, to entreat Jehovah, literally, “to conciliate by caresses.” (Kretzmann)

This was an important town in Israel’s history, located 12 miles north of Jerusalem. Years earlier, King Jeroboam 1 had set up a golden calf here for citizens of the Northern Kingdom to worship, hoping to keep them from going to Jerusalem (1 Ki 12:26-33). Bethel evidently was occupied during the Babylonian exile, and now its people sent delegates to Jerusalem to inquire whether they should continue to observe special days of fasting, something they had done for nearly 70 years. (TLSB)

entreat the Lord – Literally, this means “to soothe the face,” an idiom for appeasing someone’s anger. It indicates they were hoping for a positive answer to their question, thinking that because of the return of many Judeans and the rebuilding of the temple, the fasts could be discontinued. (TLSB)

7:3 *prophets.* Including Zechariah. (CSB)

Priests were ordinarily the interpreters of the Law (Dt 17:9), but this question was also addressed to the prophets, including Zechariah. (TLSB)

LORD of hosts. Name is used 24 times in chs 7–8. (TLSB)

I. The people of Bethel collectively. (CSB)

fast in the fifth month. These were ritual of humiliation and repentance (cf Jl 1:13-14), involving shedding of tears and fasting, recalled the horrible events of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 587 BC. (TLSB)

so many years. “The past seventy years” (v. 5). (CSB)

7:4–7 A rebuke for selfish and insincere fasting on the part of the people and the priests. (CSB)

The Lord first asks His own questions before providing an answer to Bethel’s question (8:19). (TLSB)

7:5 *ask all the people* – Zechariah is directed to speak the Lord’s words not only to the Bethel delegation but also to a much wider audience. What they heard was more than just an answer to the original question. (TLSB)

fasted ... fifth and seventh. The first of three rhetorical questions implying that their fasting was motivated by selfish interests rather than a desire to honor God. (TLSB)

seventy years. Since these fasts commemorated events related to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, the 70 years here are to be reckoned from 586 B.C. Strictly speaking, 68 years had transpired; 70 is thus a round number. (CSB)

In 518 BC, the 70-year period that began with the fall of Jerusalem was nearly over (Jer 25:11). (TLSB)

7:6 *for yourselves.* Cf. Isa 1:11–17; 58:1–7, 13–14. (CSB)

God questions whether the people’s daily activities and joyful celebrations were not also motivated solely by the natural desire to satisfy themselves, with no thought given to Him, the Giver of all good things. (TLSB)

Both their fasting and their feasting, so the Lord reminds them, was conducted without regard to Him, simply for the gratification of their own ideas. (Kretzmann)

7:7, 12 *earlier prophets.* The final rhetorical question calls to mind what earlier prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Micah had spoken. Examples of their admonitions are found in vv 9–10.. (TLSB)

South. The Negeb, along the southern boundary of Judah. (TLSB)

lowland. The low country southwest of Jerusalem, between the seacoast and the central plateau. (TLSB)

7:7 *Negev.* This was the semiarid section of Judah toward the south-east. (Kretzmann)

western foothills. Sloping toward the Mediterranean. (CSB)

They should have been familiar with the messages of the prophets before the exile, which time and again emphasized the need of a true worship of the heart, of sincere repentance and faith. The fasting in itself is a matter of indifference to the Lord. The fasting which is well-pleasing to God does not primarily consist in abstaining from food, but in one's observing the Word of the Lord and living in accordance with it at all times, as the prophets have ever preached. (Kretzmann)

7:9–10 Four tests of faithful covenant living, consisting of a series of social, moral and ethical commands. (CSB)

7:8 The Lord inspired Zechariah to restate words spoken by the former prophets. Four commands follow, two positive and two negative. (TLSB)

7:9 *justice*. The proper ordering of all society (cf. 8:16; see Isa 42:1, 4; Mic 6:8). (CSB)

God's concern for truth and impartiality should also characterize the attitude of His people (cf Jer 22:3; Ezk 18:8). (TLSB)

mercy. Or "faithful love" (cf. Hos 10:12; 12:6). (CSB)

compassion. Believers should practice kindness to others that reflects God's faithfulness and demonstrates heartfelt pity and compassion (cf. Hos 2:19-20; 6:6). Luther: "Now He, in turn, answers that this is true fasting: when we forgive our enemies, when we remit that with which we do good to them and help them. Whoever does this, fasts well, though he continue to eat and drink. (TLSB)

7:10 *oppress*. Oppression is denounced frequently in the OT (e.g., Am 2:6–8; 4:1; 5:11–12, 21–24; 8:4–6). (CSB)

God's concern for the helpless was emphasized by the former prophets (Is 1:17; Jer 7:6; Ezk 22:7). The weak have a special place in God's heart and should have a similar place in His people's hearts. (TLSB)

widow ... fatherless ... alien ... poor. For the Biblical concern for such people see, e.g., Dt 10:18. In the ancient Near East, the ideal king was expected to protect the oppressed and needy members of society. (CSB)

think evil of each other. In 8:17 the almost identical Hebrew is translated "plot evil against your neighbor," which is probably the sense here as well. (CSB)

Sin runs deeper than outward actions. It must be stopped at its source, the heart. (TLSB)

7:11 *they*. The pre-exilic forefathers, as the reference to the "earlier prophets" in v. 12 shows. (CSB)

they refused to pay attention. Zechariah reminded his audience of their ancestors' refusal to obey and the consequences of their sin. (TLSB)

stubbornly they turned their backs. See Dt 9:6, 13, 27. (CSB)

Pictures someone intending to place a yoke on the neck of an ox, only to have the animal whirl aside. (TLSB)

This was like an ox who refuses to accept the yoke on his neck. (Kretzmann)

stopped up their ears. This literally means to “make their ears heavy”; i.e., plugged their ears out of distaste for God’s Word. (TLSB)

7:12 *hard as flint.* See Eze 3:8–9. (CSB)

The ESV has “diamond hard.” This rare Hebrew word suggests just how obstinately the Israelites resisted God’s Word before the exile. Elsewhere, the Lord described Judah’s sins as written “with a point of diamond” (Jer 17:1). (TLSB)

words ... sent by his Spirit. The words of the prophets were inspired by God’s Spirit (cf. Ne 9:30; 2Pe 1:21). (CSB)

The prophets were human agents, and God’s Spirit was the divine agent. Zechariah understood that he was inspired by the Holy Spirit (cf. 2 Pt 1:19-21). (TLSB)

very angry. See 1:2, 15. (CSB)

God’s patience finally was exhausted. The threatened judgment came upon Israel with devastating force. (TLSB)

7:13 Because God’s people refused to hear Him speaking, He closed His ears to their prayers as well. (TLSB)

7:14 *scattered them.* One of the curses for covenant disobedience (Dt 28:36–37, 64–68). (CSB)

whirlwind. See Pr 1:27; Isa 40:24; Hos 4:19. (CSB)

Scattering effect of a whirlwind describes the tragic consequences of Israel’s past disobedience. (TLSB)

nations...they were strangers – The destruction of Jerusalem and the temple was bad enough; being scattered among the nations was equally hard to endure. No longer were they a people set apart but strangers without status in a foreign land (cf. Dt 28:36; Jer 16:13). (TLSB)

land ... desolate. See Dt 28:41–42, 45–52. (CSB)

no one could come or go – The land once so prosperous and richly populated (v. 7), once “flowing with milk and honey” (Ex 3:8), was left silent and abandoned. (TLSB)

This is how. By their sins. (CSB)

pleasant land. Cf. Ps 106:24; Jer 3:19. (CSB)

The children of Judah themselves being to blame for the desolation which came upon the land. When sinners receive the just punishment of their sins, they have but themselves to blame for their afflictions, though their pride would attempt to deny it. (Kretzmann)

Judah’s disobedience had turned the pleasant land into a wasteland (cf Ps 106:24; Jer 3:19–20). (TLSB)

7:1–14 Bethel’s delegation received a far different answer than they anticipated. In Zechariah’s day, priest and people alike needed to learn the lessons from Judah’s history lest the errors that caused such distress be repeated. God also wants us to examine our actions and ask whether the things we do glorify Him. With David, we must confess, “I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me” (Ps 51:3). In Christ alone is complete cleansing from all iniquity. In union with Him, we become fruit-bearing branches (Jn 15:5). • Lord of hosts, may Your Word ever be “a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Ps 119:105). Amen. (TLSB)