

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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A look at Zechariah: Thus saith the LORD of Hosts

Today's talk relates to Zechariah chapters 7 and 8 which continues our brief study of the book which bears the name of the prophet Zechariah. Zechariah was a contemporary of another prophet Haggai and both were alive and serving during the period when the Temple in Jerusalem should have been being rebuilt. Another well known prophet of this time is, of course, Daniel, although we have no record that they had met as Daniel served in Babylon, not Israel. This dates the book somewhere around 500 BC. Of Haggai we know very little, not even his father's name! But of Zechariah we are told his father's name, and the name of his grandfather (Zechariah 1:1). These facts also establish that Zechariah was from a priestly family.

Many of the books of prophecy in the Old Testament rebuke and warn the nation of Israel, often in very strong language, drawing attention to their many failures and short-comings and warning the nation of what are the inevitable consequences of such behaviour. Zechariah is very different in this respect and is filled with encouraging words and pictures of the plans that the LORD of hosts has for the nation and Jerusalem in particular. We must always bear in mind that God still has great plans for His people Israel. Paul, writing in the Epistle to the Romans poses the question, "*Has God cast away His people?*" (But Paul immediately answers his own question most emphatically. "*Certainly not!*" Romans 11:1). This is the message that Zechariah brings, and we must not dismiss it as being completely irrelevant to us as Christians. It reminds us that God is never thwarted in His plans and that He remains faithful even if His people don't.

We will have seen that the first six chapters of Zechariah are a series of eight visions that all take place within the space of one night during the second year of the reign of Darius the Mede, who became king of Babylon at the age of 62 following the fall of Belshazzar. These visions are, on the whole, tremendously encouraging and picture to us not only events that would take place in the years immediately following the prophecy, but also have a more wonderful answer in a day that is still future when Jesus as the Messiah returns to reign in Jerusalem.

Zechariah 7 and 8 that we are considering today were written some two years later. They are a sort of interlude between the first six chapters and the last six chapters which, rather than having an immediate fulfilment during the lifetime of Zechariah, look forward to the time when Jerusalem is again occupied by a foreign power, Rome. Or even still further ahead, to events yet future when the city is again surrounded and the object of the hatred and attack of the nations of the world, but enjoys a glorious deliverance when Messiah Himself fights for His people. We know from the Gospels that Messiah came to present Himself to the nation of Israel during the time of the Roman occupation but that the nation rejected and crucified Him. He will return again, this time in power and great glory and then they will receive Him. Zechariah 12 speaks about the deep mourning and repentance the nation will undergo when they realise that they had crucified their own king: "*Then they will look on Me whom they pierced. Yes, they will mourn for Him as one mourns for his only son*" (Zechariah 12:10)

As you read through the book of Zechariah you cannot help noticing the use of the words "The LORD of hosts" Forty six times in this book this title of the Lord is used, and nearly half of these are in the two chapters we are considering today. What is the significance of this name or title of Jehovah? The first time in the Bible that this name is used is in 1 Samuel 1:3 but it then occurs throughout the rest of the Old Testament, but is used only once or twice in the New Testament. "LORD" is the name, "Jehovah", he Eternal or Self-existent One. It is a name that had a distinct and particular relationship to Israel. "Hosts" means what it says, Jehovah is not only the Covenant keeping God of Israel, He is also the Lord of all, including all the heavenly hosts and the principalities and powers in the unseen world. And He holds this right and power in relation to His people, and in their interest. So it is a name of tremendous encouragement to those who belong to Him and a name of warning to those who oppose or oppress His people! Think for instance of the way James, writing in the New Testament, warns those who unjustly kept back the wages of those who mowed their fields. He said, "*The cry of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts*" (James 5:4, New English Translation).

So Zechariah 7 begins with heartening news: "*When they had sent unto the house of God Sherezer and Regemmelech, and their men, to pray before the LORD*" (Zechariah 7:1). There was a concern on the part of some to seek guidance from Jehovah. The particular concern of these men was in relation to the fasts that the nation had been observing during the seventy years of captivity in Babylon. The nation had been the subject of God's discipline

because of their disobedience and reluctance to repent. They had been humiliated as a nation at the hand of Gentile powers and eventually carried away captive into Babylon. During the seventy years of the captivity, the people had instituted fasts to bewail their situation, but now it appeared that the hand of the LORD was again towards them, and the temple was being rebuilt. Was it suitable that they continue these twice yearly fasts? This is the question that these people had come up to the House of God to ask. It is always good for us to check that our church or assembly practices are based on the truth of Scripture rather than the tradition of our forefathers.

They had been right to fast and bewail their situation; they were also right to come up to enquire of God as to their next course of action. I am not sure, though, that they got the answer they were expecting! Maybe they wanted a pat on the back for having held these fasts for so many years. But, as always, God, through the mouth of Zechariah gets to the heart of the problem immediately. God questions their motives! Why had they held their feasts and why had they fasted?

There is no indication in Scripture that the fasts had been demanded by God. Quite possibly they had been held initially with genuine feeling and concern for their plight, but now after nearly seventy years God asks, *“Did you at all fast unto Me, even to Me?”* (Zechariah 7:5). God is always concerned about our motives. *“Behold, You will have truth in the inward parts”* (Psalm 51:6). It might have looked good; it might even have made them feel good. But did holding the fasts reflect a genuine change of heart on the part of the nation? If they had been obedient to the Word of God, and responded to the many warnings that God had given through His prophets, the nation would have not been exiled in Babylon in the first place. Then there would have been no need of fasts. This is how it is expressed: *“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?”* (Zechariah 7:7)

In these verses, God is pointing out through Zechariah that there is no evidence at all of true repentance. Keeping the fasts for seventy years was a remarkable memorial, but in reality nothing had changed. *“Rend your heart and not your garments”* is how another prophet expressed it, (Joel 2:13). It is not difficult to apply this same truth to ourselves. Have our church services, our meetings, become a ritual, or are they still marked by reality? Do I personally, genuinely acknowledge the presence of the Lord Jesus, and the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit to direct what is said or sung? Or is everything arranged in advance, a well-oiled operation that looks and sounds good and will embarrass no one? These are very searching questions, and in times of weakness there is a temptation to bolster appearances rather than accept our failure and disobedience and repent. This is what God, through Zechariah, was asking the nation of Israel. *“Did you really fast for Me - for Me?”* (Zechariah 7:5)

The second part of the answer to these men who came up to the House of God with their questions is given in Zechariah 7:8-10: *“Then the word of the LORD came to Zechariah, saying, ‘Thus says the LORD of hosts: “Execute true justice, show mercy and compassion everyone to his brother. 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 the first part of God’s response deals with our attitude to Himself, the second part deals with our attitude to our brothers and sisters, the poor and the needy. So not only should our attitude towards God be right but our attitude to others must also be right. I suppose it is true to say that the one will follow the other.

Execute true justice

And there are three specific areas that God is concerned with. *“Execute true justice”* (Zechariah 7:9): judgement or justice meted out with absolute regard for what is true and righteous. Not coloured in any way by family or business relationships and certainly not influenced by any thought of personal gain. How often do we allow gossip to influence our thoughts about and our dealings with another believer or group of Christians?

Show mercy and compassion everyone to his brother

The second area for concern is *“Show mercy and compassion everyone to his brother”* (Zechariah 7:9): We are the recipients of God’s mercy and compassion on an amazing scale! We must show the same level of mercy and compassion to others, especially fellow believers. Think of the parable the Lord told in Matthew 18:21-35 of a servant who was forgiven a very large debt by his master, but then went and demanded immediate and full payment of a much smaller debt from a fellow servant. The master condemned him roundly and punished the unmerciful servant severely, and justly so.

Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor

Then thirdly God, speaking through Zechariah, says, *“Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor”* (Zechariah 7:9). Sadly in all societies and in all circumstances there are vulnerable people who are easily taken advantage of. They are the particular objects of God’s care and concern, and they should also be the objects of our concern, or at the very least we are absolutely not to take advantage of them. What is true religion? James tells us

that *“Pure and undefiled religion before God the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their misfortune and to keep oneself unstained by the world”* (James 1:27).

Zechariah 7:11-14 describes how the nation had reacted. Sadly it does not make happy reading! *“But they refused to heed, shrugged their shoulders, and stopped their ears so that they could not hear. 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,”* (Zechariah 7:11-12). The nation had been appealed to, exhorted and warned; they had refused to heed the warnings and had become increasingly hard-hearted. What followed next was inevitable! *“Thus great wrath came from the LORD of hosts. 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. *“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,”* Zechariah 7:12-14. They had refused to listen to God; now for a time God would refuse to listen to them! What a warning for us!

Zechariah 8 marks another revelation from God to the nation through Zechariah the prophet. Zechariah 8 has 23 verses which are divided up into eleven sections, each of which contains a new promise and commences with words like, *“Thus says the LORD of Hosts”* This Name of God is important. The promises might seem improbable or even impossible to us, but to the LORD of Hosts nothing whatever is beyond His power! Zechariah 7 gives us the negative reasons for obedience, chapter 8 the positive reasons! God is always faithful and He promises great future blessings! The LORD of Hosts has spoken! Be encouraged!

Section 1

Let's quickly go through these sections. First of all in Zechariah 8:2 we have the statement that God is zealous (or jealous) for Zion, that is Jerusalem. Jealousy in the Bible is generally positive. It is a deep care and concern that would guard the object of one's affection. The LORD of Hosts is fervently zealous for Zion, the city where He has placed His name. This is good! He has an equal care for His church today.

Section 2

Zechariah 8:3 leads on from this; the city had been spoiled and deserted, an object of mockery for the surrounding nations. Lying, deceit and shame had marked her. This would all change. This is still future, but God who lives outside of time speaks as if it has already happened; it is as certain as that! *“Thus says the LORD: I am returned unto Zion, and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem: and Jerusalem shall be called a city of truth; and the mountain of the LORD of Hosts, the holy mountain.”*

Section 3

The third section is Zechariah 8:4-5, and interestingly this section both starts and ends with the reminder that it is the LORD of Hosts who is speaking. *“Thus says the LORD of hosts; There shall yet old men and old women dwell in the streets of Jerusalem, and every man with his staff in his hand for very age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in the streets. Thus says the LORD of hosts: If it be marvellous in the eyes of the remnant of this people in these days, should it also be marvellous in mine eyes? says the LORD of hosts.”* The very ones who suffer first and most during times of natural disaster or warfare, the old and the young, are pictured here completely secure and at peace. It might be marvellous or improbable to us, but not in the eyes of the LORD of Hosts!

Section 4

Next, in Zechariah 8:7-8, the LORD of Hosts promises that He will gather the scattered remnants of His people. Over the centuries the twelve tribes of Israel appear to have almost been entirely lost from view, absorbed into many different nations of the world. Some have returned to their land, the vast majority have not. The LORD of Hosts will call them all together to again occupy their God-given heritage. In this still future day, the truth of these verses will be very obvious: *“They shall be My people, and I will be their God.”*

Section 5

In the next section, Zechariah 8:9-10, the LORD of Hosts encourages His people to be strong and not to doubt. He points back to previous occasions when He had spoken by His prophets and foretold the rebuilding of the temple when there wasn't even enough money to pay the wages of the workers, and their enemies had tried their hardest to disrupt the work. God's word through His prophets had come true in spite of the poverty of the people.

Section 6

Another section is introduced to us in Zechariah 8:11. The LORD of Hosts had had to deal harshly with His people formerly; they were disobedient and were not listening to Him. But now God would turn their poverty into plenty and the barrenness of the land into amazing bounty. The nation of Israel had been a curse to the other nations, but in that day it would be a blessing.

Sections 7 and 8

This same theme continues in the section from Zechariah 8:14-17. The LORD of Hosts speaks of the fact that He was now determined to bless them, or do good to Jerusalem, just as in the past he had been determined to punish them. "Do not fear" He says, "*These are the things you shall do: speak each man truth to his neighbour, give judgement in your gates for truth, justice and peace*". The term "gates" in the Old Testament speaks of administration in a city. It was there that who came into the city and what business was conducted within the city could be determined. Sadly, in our own day, we have witnessed the corruption that so often goes hand in hand with those who administer our affairs. In that day there will be righteousness and truth.

Section 9

The next section in this chapter returns to the question that opened today's talk: Should they continue to keep the days of fasting? Yes, but God would turn them into feasts! "Thus says the LORD of hosts: the fast of the fourth month, and the fast of the fifth, and the fast of the seventh, and the fast of the tenth, shall be to the house of Judah joy and gladness, and cheerful feasts; therefore love the truth and peace" (Zechariah 8:19). What an amazing turn-around! These concerned people had come to ask as to whether or not it was suitable to continue to fast, and now God is telling them they would feast. I am reminded of the parable the Lord told in Luke 15:11-32. The younger son had despised his father (Luke 15:12), and left to live in a far off country, well away from his father's loving influence (Luke 15:13). For a few brief months he had enjoyed himself, wine, women and song! (Luke 15:14). Eventually, of course, it had all come to an end and he was so hungry that he would have eaten the swill that the pigs were eating. (Luke 15:15-16). In repentance, he returned to his father's house and was greeted, not with bread and water, but by a feast! (Luke 15:17-24) Another prophet writes: "Therefore the redeemed of the LORD shall return, and come with singing unto Zion; and everlasting joy shall be upon their head: they shall obtain gladness and joy; and sorrow and mourning shall flee away" (Isaiah 51:11).

Sections 10 and 11

The last two sections of this chapter convey the extent to which this blessing and prosperity will be enjoyed. If we think back to the first verses we read, it was just one small group of people who were concerned about these fasts, but now it would include not just the whole nation but the inhabitants of many nations. "*Thus says the LORD of hosts: It shall yet come to pass, that there shall come people, and the inhabitants of many cities. And the inhabitants of one city shall go to another, saying, Let us go speedily to pray before the LORD, and to seek the LORD of hosts: I will go also. Yea, many people and strong nations shall come to seek the LORD of hosts in Jerusalem, and to pray before the LORD. Thus says the LORD of hosts: In those days it shall come to pass, that ten men shall take hold out of all languages of the nations, even shall take hold of the skirt of him that is a Jew, saying, we will go with you: for we have heard that God is with you*" (Zechariah 8:20-23).

In bringing this back to the Christian period in which we live, is it right to refer to Paul's letter to the Corinthians? There Paul is writing about church order, and he is saying that if things are done decently and in obedience to God's word there will be blessing not just for those believers present, but also the potential for the blessing and salvation of unbelievers! He writes, "*But if all prophesy, and there come in one that does not believe, or one unlearned, he is convinced of all, he is judged of all. And thus are the secrets of his heart made manifest; and so falling down on his face he will worship God, and report that God is in you of a truth*" (1 Corinthians 14:24-25). We live in a culture and in a country where the Word of God is challenged and constantly undermined and ignored. Maybe it often feels that our church services are fasts, not feasts!

There is a temptation to yield ground to others who ignore the plain teaching of scripture. We mustn't! These two Old Testament chapters encourage us. God's eye is still over His people. He might have to rebuke but He will move quickly to bless those who repent and are obedient to His Word. And others will share in our blessing!

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