

Zechariah 7:1–14

Empty Ritual or Real Obedience?

Chapter 7 marks a shift in Zechariah from visions to a very practical question about worship, fasting, and obedience.

1. A Religious Question: “Should We Keep Fasting?” (Zechariah 7:1–3)

Now in the fourth year of King Darius it came to pass that the word of the Lord came to Zechariah, on the fourth day of the ninth month, Chislew, when the people sent Sherezer, with Regem-Melech and his men, to the house of God, to pray before the Lord, and to ask the priests who were in the house of the Lord of hosts, and the prophets, saying, “Should I weep in the fifth month and fast as I have done for so many years?”

While the people of Judah were in Babylon, they had established special fasts to commemorate the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. One of these fasts took place in the fifth month. Now that some of them had returned to the land and the temple was being rebuilt, they wondered:

“Do we still need to keep this fast? Is God asking us to continue this?”

They send representatives to the house of God to ask the priests and prophets for guidance. It sounds like a very spiritual question—but God’s answer cuts far deeper than the calendar.

2. God’s Response: “Who Were You Really Fasting For?” (Zechariah 7:4–7)

Then the word of the Lord of hosts came to me, saying, “Say to all the people of the land, and to the priests: ‘When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months during those seventy years, did you really fast for Me—for Me?’

When you eat and when you drink, do you not eat and drink for yourselves?

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, and the South and the Lowland were inhabited?’”

God’s answer is surprising. He does not start by saying “Yes, keep the fast” or “No, stop the fast.” Instead, He asks a heart-searching question:

“When you fasted all those years—was it really for Me?”

God exposes the danger of religious habit without spiritual reality. They had ritualized their grief over the destruction of the temple, but they had not truly learned from the sin that led to that destruction.

God essentially says:

“It would have been far better if your fathers had listened to My prophets when the city was still standing, when you were prospering, and when I warned you to change.”

The issue is not whether they fast; the issue is why they fast, and whether their hearts and lives match their religious activity.

This echoes the message God spoke earlier through Isaiah:

“Is this not the fast that I have chosen:
To loose the bonds of wickedness,
To undo the heavy burdens,
To let the oppressed go free,
And that you break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
And that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out;
When you see the naked, that you cover him,
And not hide yourself from your own flesh?” (Isaiah 58:6–7)

God does not despise fasting, but He rejects empty religious exercises that ignore justice, mercy, and obedience.

3. What God Really Wanted All Along (Zechariah 7:8–10)

God now reminds them of what He had always desired:

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 stranger or the poor.
Let none of you plan evil in his heart
Against his brother.’”

This is the kind of “fast” God loves:

- True justice – being fair, honest, and upright in how we treat people, especially when we have power over them.
- Mercy and compassion – not just feeling sorry for others, but acting in kindness and generosity.
- Protection of the vulnerable – widows, orphans, foreigners, and the poor.
- Purity of heart toward others – refusing to harbor evil plans or grudges against our neighbors.

God is saying, “This is what I was after all along. Not just special days on the calendar, but a way of life marked by justice, mercy, and love.”

4. How Their Fathers Responded—and the Consequences (Zechariah 7:11–14)

Sadly, their ancestors had not responded well:

“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. 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.”

Notice the progression:

- They refused to listen.
- They shrugged their shoulders—a picture of stubborn resistance.
- They stopped their ears—they did not want to hear God’s voice.
- They hardened their hearts like flint—unresponsive, unyielding.

God had called to them through His prophets, but they would not respond. So when judgment came and they cried to Him, He allowed them to taste the consequences of their hardness:

“Just as I called and you would not hear, so you called and I did not answer.”

This is not God delighting in silence, but God honoring the reality that people can continually refuse His voice until they experience the results of their choices. Their refusal to live justly and mercifully ultimately led to their scattering and to a land left desolate.

Practical Application

1. Ritual without obedience is empty.

Attending services, fasting, observing special days, or engaging in spiritual activities can look very impressive. But God’s question still stands: “Did you really do it for Me—for Me?” He is seeking hearts that love Him and lives that reflect His character, not just outward routines.

2. God cares deeply how we treat people.

Justice, mercy, compassion, and integrity are not “extra credit” in the Christian life; they are central to God’s heart. How we treat the vulnerable, how we conduct ourselves in business, how we speak about others—these matter greatly to Him.

3. A hardened heart is more dangerous than a broken temple.

The people grieved over the destruction of the temple, but God wanted them to grieve over the stubbornness that led to that destruction. Today, the bigger issue is not whether our external structures are intact, but whether our hearts are soft toward God and His Word.

4. Listening to God now prepares us for the day when we need Him.

God told them: when I called, you would not listen; when you called, I did not answer. This is not a threat to scare us, but a warning to take seriously. A life that consistently refuses God’s voice cannot expect to enjoy the fullness of His fellowship and help.

A Challenge for Believers

- Are there “religious habits” in your life that have become more about tradition and less about truly honoring God?
- Is there anyone you are oppressing, ignoring, or treating unjustly—maybe not openly, but in your attitude, your words, or your choices?
- Have you grown dull or resistant to God’s Word—shrugging your shoulders inwardly, closing your ears when His Spirit convicts you?

Ask the Lord to search your heart:

- “Lord, am I fasting, praying, serving, or giving just for myself—for how it makes me feel or look?”
- “Am I ignoring the kind of fast You delight in: loosing burdens, lifting the oppressed, caring for the poor, showing mercy and compassion?”

Let Zechariah 7 call you back to a faith that is **real**, not just **ritual**—to a life where obedience, justice, and mercy are more important than spiritual image.

An Invitation to Non-Believers

This chapter shows us something uncomfortable but important:

- God sees beyond our religious appearances.
- God calls out both personal and collective hardness of heart.
- God warns that ignoring His voice has real consequences.

But this same God has also acted in incredible mercy.

We have all, in one way or another, refused His voice, chosen our own way, and treated others in ways that fall short of His justice and love. Yet God did not leave us in that condition. He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to bring us back.

Jesus came into this world and lived a life of perfect obedience and perfect compassion. Then He went to the cross, where He shed His blood to bear the judgment our sins deserve. Jesus saved us when He shed His blood on the cross.

On the third day, He rose from the dead. His resurrection declares that He is God, Savior, and Lord. He is alive, and He invites you not just into religion, but into a living relationship with Him.

You cannot save yourself by fasting more, trying harder, or keeping more rituals. You need a new heart—a heart made soft and alive by God Himself.

Today, you can respond to Him:

- Admit before God that you are a sinner and cannot make yourself right.
- Believe that Jesus died on the cross for your sins and rose again.
- Ask Him, in your own words, to forgive you, to change your heart, and to be Lord of your life.

If you turn to Him, He will not turn you away.

The same God who warned His people through Zechariah still speaks today—not just to condemn, but to call you into forgiveness, new life, and a genuine walk with Him through Jesus Christ.