

ZECHARIAH: GOD'S PRESENT DIRECTIVES AND FUTURE HOPE

XI: God's Call For Obedience Above Ritualism

(Zechariah 7:1-14)

I. Introduction

- A. Zechariah along with Haggai called the returning Hebrews back to rebuilding the temple, and he gave God's directives and future hope. (Ryrie Study Bible, KJV, 1978, "Introduction to the Book of Zechariah," p. 1310)
- B. In Zechariah 7:1-14, God responded to a question from a Hebrew delegation from Bethel on whether they should continue to observe the self-imposed fast that lamented the burning of the first temple. God's response offers a timeless lesson in obeying Him above man-made ritualism, so we view it for insight and edification:

II. God's Call For Obedience Above Ritualism, Zechariah 7:1-14.

- A. The Lord gave a first message to direct Israel away from dead ritualism to heeding His Word, Zech. 7:1-7:
 - 1. Partway through the temple reconstruction, some men from Bethel arrived to ask the temple priests and prophets if they should still observe the fast of the fifth month to commemorate the burning of the temple by the Babylonians, Zechariah 7:1-3; *Ibid.*, fn. to Zech. 7:3. (The KJV omits the phrase that they were from Bethel, but the ESV and NIV correctly add it, Kittel, Biblia Hebraica, p. 963; *Ibid.*, fn. to Zech. 7:2.)
 - 2. The only fast that God had told Israel to observe was the fast of the Day of Atonement on the tenth day of the seventh month (Leviticus 16:29-30), so the fast of the fifth month recalling the burning of the temple and the fast of the seventh month remembering the "assassination of Gedaliah, the Jewish governor of Judah (2 Kings 25:23-25)" were both self-imposed rituals, *Ibid.*, Ryrie, ftns. to Zechariah 7:3 and 7:5-7.
 - 3. God directed Zechariah to respond by not immediately answering the question by the men of Bethel, waiting to do so in His fourth message in Zechariah 8:18-19 (Bible Know. Com., O. T., p. 1559), but God had Zechariah address all Israel with a special response from Him, Zechariah 7:4-5a.
 - 4. That divine response critiqued their two self-imposed fasts of the fifth month for the temple's burning and the seventh month for the death of Gedaliah all during their seventy years of the Babylonian Captivity, for those fasts were not observed for the Lord, but for themselves, Zechariah 7:5b-6. The people had selfishly grieved over the loss of their national sovereignty and their homeland, but they had not repented of the sins they had committed that had led to God's allowing their nation to fall and be destroyed by Babylon.
 - 5. To explain, the Lord asked them if they had not heeded the words that He had cried by the former prophets when Jerusalem was prosperous and inhabited, and the cities flourished in the nation, words calling for them to turn back to the Lord and to practice justice, Zechariah 7:7.
- B. God then gave a second message to lead Israel to recall their forefathers' need to repent, Zechariah 7:8-14:
 - 1. This second message in Zechariah 7:8-14 "centered on the conduct of the earlier generation that resulted in the Exile," *Ibid.* God had wanted the forefathers to execute true judgment and to show mercy and compassions to one another, not to oppress the vulnerable in their midst like the widows, the fatherless, the foreigners or the poor, and not for anyone to plot evil against his neighbor, Zechariah 7:8-10.
 - 2. However, they had refused to obey this divine directive, figuratively rebelliously pulling away their shoulder, stopping their ears that they should not hear, and making their hearts as hard like stone lest they should obey the Law of God that had been voiced by the former prophets, Zechariah 7:11-12a.
 - 3. Accordingly, God's great wrath had fallen on them because they would not obey, Zechariah 7:12b.
 - 4. As God had cried unto the people through His prophets and they would not hear, so they eventually cried unto the Lord when the Babylonians came, but God would not hear them, but He scattered them among the Gentile nations that were strange to them, their land was made desolate, and no man passed through the countryside or returned in their land, for the land itself was left desolate, Zechariah 7:13-14.

Lesson: *When men from Bethel asked the priests and prophets if they should still keep the fast commemorating the burning of the first temple now that the second temple was being rebuilt, God said that He was not impressed by their self-imposed fasts over the temple's destruction nor over their nation's fall, for those fasts were held in self-centered grief over their loss of blessing. Rather, God wanted His people to obey Him that He might bless them.*

Application: *(1) May we never fall in love with religious rituals, for God has no love for rituals for the sake of rituals, but in heartfelt obedience to Him. (2) May we hold to the lifestyle that expresses true judgment, mercy, compassions, protecting the vulnerable in our midst and not plotting evil against one another, the lifestyle God that desired from Israel's forefathers. (3) If we realize that we hold to a false spirituality, may we repent of it.*