

Zechariah 7:1-7

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Zechariah receives a delegation of returning exiles from Bethel who inquire whether they should continue to fast yearly to commemorate and lament the temple's destruction. The LORD tells the prophet to inform them that their fasting and feasting did not please Him because they were heartless rituals.

The previous chapters already mentioned two dates in Zechariah's ministry. The prophet received his first oracle "in the eighth month of the second year of Darius" king of Persia (October-November 520 BC). In this message, the LORD asked His covenant people to return to Him instead of following their forefathers who ignored His laws and consequently fell under His judgment, having gone into exile (Zechariah 1:1-6).

Then, the prophet received a series of visions in one night, precisely "on the twenty-fourth day of the eleventh month, which is the month Shebat, in the second year of Darius," the fourth king who ruled Persia (Zechariah 1:7-6:8). The date here corresponds to February 15, 519 BC in our modern calendar. This chapter (Zechariah 7) begins with a new date in the book. The prophecy transpired *in the fourth year of King Darius, on the fourth day of the ninth month, which is Chislev* (vs 1).

Like Haggai, Zechariah dated the prophecy according to the regnal year of the Persian king because there was no king in Judah during that time, the time of exile (Haggai 1:1, Daniel 2). Chislev is a month in the Jewish calendar. The date corresponds to December 7, 518 BC in our modern calendar. During that time, *the word of the LORD came to Zechariah* (vs 1).

The Hebrew term for *LORD* is "Yahweh," the covenant name of God. That name speaks of God's character and His relationship with His covenant people (Exodus 3:14, 34:6). Thus, the prophet told his audience he was not the primary source of the message. Instead, the revelation came from God, Judah's Ruler or Master. The Suzerain God had a *word* for His vassals, the people who had entered into a covenant/treaty with Him.

The *word of the LORD* is a technical concept for the prophetic word of revelation. It refers to Yahweh's message in which He revealed His will to a human messenger and commanded him to pass it on (1 Kings 6:11, 16:1, Zechariah 1:1). In our passage, the messenger was *Zechariah*, a name meaning "Yahweh has remembered." Like all the prophets of God, *Zechariah* had a particular calling to see or hear what God was saying, live it out, and proclaim it to the people around him.

The prophet provided some background information about a delegation he received from *Bethel*. A town twelve miles north of Jerusalem, *Bethel* was on the northern fringe of the Persian province known as Yehud (Judah). It had been a center for cultic activity since the time of Abraham (Genesis 12:8). According to Zechariah, *the town of Bethel had sent Sharezer and Regemmelech and their men to seek the favor of the LORD* (vs 2).

The idiom *seek the favor* is literally “to soften the face.” It means to entreat *the LORD* or ask Him to grant a petition (Exodus 32:11, 1 Kings 13:6). The two men mentioned by name—*Sharezer and Regemmelech*—were probably the leaders of the *Bethel* delegation. They and *their men*, wanting to know God’s will and gain His favorable response, spoke *to the priests who belong to the house of the LORD of hosts and to the prophets* (vs 3).

The *priests* were religious leaders of Israel and Judah, serving as intermediaries between the people and God. They performed religious rites, maintained the holy sites, and provided wise advice and instructions to the people. The *prophets* were God’s envoys. They anticipated the punishment of wickedness and a better life on earth for those remaining faithful to the LORD (Isaiah 24:21–23, Ezekiel 36–39). They also spoke the truth about the present and what would happen if the people of God did not turn from their evil ways and return to God in genuine faith.

Considering the role of the *priests* and the *prophets*, the *Bethel* delegation went to *the house of the LORD of hosts* to speak to them. The *house of the LORD* refers to the temple in Jerusalem, which the Babylonians had destroyed when they invaded the city. In Zechariah’s day, the rebuilding was in progress.

The text tells us that God is *the LORD of hosts*, a phrase occurring several times in the prophetic books (Haggai 1:2, 5, 7, 9, 2:4, 6, Zechariah 1:3, 4). The term translated as *host* is “Sabaoth” in Hebrew and means “armies.” It refers to the angelic armies of heaven, whose leader is *the LORD*. Since the term *host* qualifies God as a warrior, the phrase describes His power as He leads His army to defeat His adversaries (Amos 5:16, 9:5, Habakkuk 2:17).

Here in Zechariah, the *name LORD of hosts* demonstrates God’s power as the supreme warrior who has complete control and authority over all human affairs. Indeed, *the LORD* is “God Almighty” (Genesis 17:1). He is “the God of all flesh,” and nothing is impossible for Him (Jeremiah 32:27). Thus, the *Bethel* delegation went to the temple to seek an answer to a question relating to religious observance. They united their voices and allowed one man to speak as their representative. So, he asked, *Shall I weep in the fifth month and abstain, as I have done these many years?* (vs 4).

In biblical times, people would often *weep* because of intense personal loss. Abraham wept over the death of his wife Sarah (Genesis 23:2) and David over the loss of his good friend Jonathan (2 Samuel 1). To *abstain* means to refrain oneself from doing something. Abstinence is the forbearance of some activities as a matter of command and voluntary practice for moral and religious purposes. In our passage, abstinence likely refers to the practice of fasting. That means the people of Judah (including those from *Bethel*) usually wept and fasted *in the fifth month* of the year. They had traveled to ask whether that is a practice they should continue.

What was the purpose of this religious observance?

According to the Kings materials, in 586 BC, Nebuchadnezzar, and his army “burned the house of the LORD [the temple], the king’s house, and all the houses of Jerusalem on the seventh day of the fifth month” (2 Kings 25:8). For this reason, the Judeans established a fast day on that date to commemorate and lament the destruction of Jerusalem. They observed that day yearly while

in captivity in Babylonia. But in Zechariah's day, the temple rebuilding was in progress, and many Judeans were back in their homeland. Therefore, the *Bethel* delegation wondered whether they should continue to fast and mourn over the temple, since it was now under construction.

The initial response to the people's inquiry came as a rebuke. To ensure the *Bethel* delegation did not misjudge Zechariah, he introduced the answer with a statement confirming the divine source of the message, saying, *Then the word of the LORD of hosts came to me* (vs 4). The *LORD*, the great warrior, was the one answering the delegation.

The prophet, being God's messenger, merely proclaimed the message. So, *the LORD* commanded him to speak *to all the people of the land and to the priests* (vs 5). God spoke to the delegation, but answered as though they represented all the Judeans: *the LORD* addressed everyone, even their religious leaders. He did so by asking three rhetorical questions to make a point.

The first rhetorical question reads, *When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months these seventy years, was it actually for Me that you fasted?* (vs 5). Fasting is the deliberate, temporary abstention from food for religious purposes. It often occurs in the context of mourning. It is a means of opening oneself to God, expressing grief and sorrow over sins, and redirecting oneself to God. It involves making petitions to God and seeking guidance and wisdom. In this sense, it is a process leading to purification (Psalm 69:10).

The people of Judah *fasted and mourned in the fifth month* to commemorate and lament the fall of Jerusalem (including the destruction of Solomon's temple) to the Babylonians in 586 BC (2 Kings 25:8). Jewish tradition holds that 9th of Av (5th month) is also when the Romans destroyed the temple built by Herod in 70 AD. So to this day Jews fast on the 9th of Av to lament the destruction of both Temples. It is commonly known as the Jewish Fast of Av.

They also performed the same rituals *in the seventh month* to lament the murder of the Judean governor named Gedaliah, whom the Babylonians had appointed after the fall of Jerusalem (2 Kings 25:25, Jeremiah 41:1–3).

The Judeans had commemorated these events for about *seventy years* while in exile and shortly after returning to their homeland (Jeremiah 25:11–12, 29:10). But such religious activities did not please the *LORD* because the people were performing them without a sincere heart. In this case, the expected answer to the rhetorical question whether they fasted for God is "No. The people did not *fast* for God." Therefore, He informed them that their fasts and mourning were meaningless to Him.

God judges the heart, and looks at our intents. Scripture indicates that God knows our intent better than we (Hebrews 4:12).

The *LORD* asked a second rhetorical question requiring a "Yes" answer: *When you eat and drink, do you not eat for yourselves, and do you not drink for yourselves?* (vs 6). The expected answer is "Yes, the people ate and drank for themselves." They performed the festive rituals to

satisfy their appetite, not to seek God and humble themselves before Him. Therefore, God questioned their motives and rebuked them.

Commenting on the *LORD*'s questions, the prophet Zechariah asked a third one, *Are not these the words which the LORD proclaimed by the former prophets?* (vs 7). The expected answer to Zechariah's third rhetorical question is also, "Yes." The *LORD* had made *these words* known through those messengers.

The *former prophets* were those living and ministering before the exile in 586 BC, like Joel, Hosea, Amos, Isaiah, etc. The *LORD* commanded them to warn His covenant people of their sins and invite them to repentance in order to avoid judgment (Isaiah 1:10–17). They reminded the covenant community that God cared about them and wanted to communicate His sovereign will for them. God's covenant/treaty with Israel required them to be disciplined if they forsook the self-governing ways of "love your neighbor" and instead sought the pagan culture of exploitation (Deuteronomy 28:15-68). The prophets warned them to repent in order to avoid falling into judgment under these enforcement covenant provisions.

These *prophets* were God's servants, ministering to the people of God before the Babylonian invasion. At that time, *Jerusalem was inhabited and prosperous along with its cities around it and the Negev and the foothills* (vs 7).

The name *Negev* means "dry land" in Hebrew. It refers to a dry and hot region in the southern part of Judah (Deuteronomy 34:3). The *foothills* ("shephelah" in Hebrew) describe the hills between the southern region of Judah and the Mediterranean coastal plain (Joshua 15:33–44). Jerusalem and the cities around it were prosperous before Judah's exile to Babylon in 586 BC. These regions were *inhabited and prosperous*. But after the Babylonian invasion, they were not profitable, and few people inhabited them.

Therefore, Zechariah reminded his audience that the former generations did not listen to the *prophets* when they rebuked them for empty, self-seeking worship. While the people of Israel and Judah mourned and fasted, they continued to produce wicked deeds, thus displeasing their covenant/treaty partner, Yahweh.

Yet, they expected Him to bless them, in clear contradiction to their covenant/treaty (Deuteronomy 30:19). The book of Isaiah describes the people's selfish attitude when they asked *the LORD*, "Why have we fasted and You do not see? Why have we humbled ourselves and You do not notice?" (Isaiah 58:3a).

But *the LORD* answered them, pointing out their weaknesses and evil deeds:

"Behold, on the day of your fast you find your desire, and drive hard all your workers. Behold, you fast for contention and strife and to strike with a wicked fist. You do not fast like you do today to make your voice heard on high."
(Isaiah 58:3b–4)

The *LORD* knows every heart and rewards people according to their deeds (Hebrews 4:12). Nobody can mock Him by reaping what they did not sow (Galatians 6:7). Those who seek God will find His favor and blessings. When believers *fast* out of reverence for God, He inclines His ears to hear and answer their petitions. But what is God-centered fasting, the kind of fasting that pleases *the LORD*? Zechariah will answer this question for his readers in the next section.

Biblical Text

¹In the fourth year of King Darius, the word of the LORD came to Zechariah on the fourth *day* of the ninth month, *which is* Chislev. ² Now *the town of* Bethel had sent Sharezer and Regemmelech and their men to seek the favor of the LORD, ³ speaking to the priests who belong to the house of the LORD of hosts, and to the prophets, saying, “Shall I weep in the fifth month and abstain, as I have done these many years?”⁴ Then the word of the LORD of hosts came to me, saying, ⁵ “Say to all the people of the land and to the priests, ‘When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months these seventy years, was it actually for Me that you fasted? ⁶ When you eat and drink, do you not eat for yourselves and do you not drink for yourselves? ⁷ Are not *these* the words which the LORD proclaimed by the former prophets, when Jerusalem was inhabited and prosperous along with its cities around it, and the Negev and the foothills were inhabited?’”