

Zechariah 7:8-14

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Zechariah spells out four requirements that sum up the ethical teaching of the prophets prior to Judah's exile to Babylon. He reminds the post-exilic community of Judah that their forefathers' rejection of that teaching was why God punished them severely by scattering them abroad at the mercy of foreign nations, consistent with the provision of God's covenant/treaty with Israel.

In the previous section, Zechariah received a delegation from the town of Bethel, inquiring whether they should continue to fast annually to commemorate and lament the destruction of Solomon's temple, which the Babylonians destroyed in 586 BC. The LORD used the occasion to inform the people of the entire land that their religious rituals did not please Him since they did not come from a genuine heart (Zechariah 7:1-7).

In the present section, the prophet provides an example from the nation's history. He outlines four distinct qualities that summed up the standard by which the earlier Jewish generations were supposed to have lived, according to their covenant/treaty with God. Unfortunately, they failed to meet the requirements, leading God to send them into exile, consistent with the provision of their covenant/treaty (Deuteronomy 28:64). However, before Zechariah spelled out the stipulations, the narrator inserted a sentence to confirm the divine source of the message. He declared, *Then the word of the LORD came to Zechariah* (vs 8).

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). Using the divine name, the narrator told his audience that *Zechariah* was not the primary author of the message. Instead, the *word* came from God, Judah's Ruler or Master, requiring obedience from His vassals to bless them beyond measure.

The *word of the LORD* carries significant weight in the Bible and is a technical concept for the prophetic word of revelation. It refers to the *LORD's* message in which He revealed His will to a human messenger and commanded him to relay it to others (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 others; in this case, to the community of Judah that had returned from the Babylonian exile, with the permission of Persia.

The prophet introduced the divine revelation with the prophetic formula: *Thus has the LORD of hosts said* (vs 9). The term translated as *hosts* is "Sabaoth" in Hebrew and means "armies." It refers to the angelic armies of heaven. Thus, the phrase signifies that the all-powerful God leads His army to fight for His people and defeat His opponents.

The divine message begins here, where the prophet spelled out two of the four qualities needed among the post-exilic community. He did so by using two positive commands: *Dispense true justice and practice kindness and compassion each to his brother* (vs 9). The term for *justice* is

“mišpat” in Hebrew. It can refer to God’s laws or stipulations, encompassing individual commandments and a summary of the whole law (Exodus 24:3, Deuteronomy 5:1, 7:12). In our passage, “mišpat” refers to the administration of legal decisions in a courtroom. But why did *the LORD* ask His people to *dispense true justice*?

In ancient Israel and Judah, judges often rendered *justice* with favoritism and even accepted bribes from one of the parties to condemn the innocent and free the guilty. But that was not God’s design for them because He had established Israel as a self-governing nation based upon the rule of law, private property, and consent of the governed. That is why He commanded His covenant people not to “take a bribe,” for doing so “blinds the eyes of the wise and perverts the words of the righteous” (Deuteronomy 16:18–20).

Here in Zechariah, *the LORD* used the adjective *true* to intensify the command, thereby telling His people not to render a judicial decision based on personal profit (Ezekiel 18:8). When *justice* is for sale, it becomes injustice, which is against God’s standard, for God is “a God of faithfulness and without injustice” (Deuteronomy 32:4).

Moreover, the covenant people were to *practice kindness and compassion, each to his brother*. The Hebrew term for *kindness* is “ḥesed.” It can denote the love of God for His covenant people (Psalm 103:8). At times, it refers to the love of man for God (Hosea 6:4). In our passage, it deals with brotherly love (Hosea 4:1).

The term for *compassion* is “rakham” in the Hebrew language. It refers to a deep love of one toward another. The prophet Isaiah used it to describe the love of a mother toward her nursing baby (Isaiah 49:15). In Zechariah, “rakham” speaks of the love that the Judeans were to display toward one another because they were all *brothers*, having “the LORD God” as their father (Deuteronomy 14:1). This command to love their fellow Jews echoes the covenant/treaty requirement to love one’s neighbor as they love themselves (Leviticus 19:18). Jesus affirmed that this was the second most important commandment (Matthew 22:37-39).

Zechariah then balanced the positive commands with two negative ones. The first speaks favorably of the most vulnerable people of the Jewish community. The idea behind the instruction lies in the truth that human beings tend to mistreat those who cannot stand up for themselves. Some wealthy people enjoy abusing the unfortunate ones to fill their pockets. That is why the Suzerain God reminded the Judeans *not to oppress the widow or the orphan, the stranger or the poor* (vs 10), for doing so would follow the pagan culture of exploitation, rather than God’s way of mutual love and collaboration. The pagan culture treated *the widow* and *orphan* as inferior objects, and violated their dignity.

To *oppress* does not reflect God’s design for human beings because He created them “in His image” (Genesis 1:27). But since the fall of man in Genesis 3, humanity has known and practiced injustice and mistreatment. This has, sadly, been particularly common for those finding themselves in a difficult circumstance, such as a *widow*.

A *widow* was without a male provider, in an era where food and safety depending largely upon the energy of human muscles. Without aid from the social structure of the Jewish community, a

widow could be preyed upon, and suffer from poverty. While the *widow* was in difficult circumstances, people with evil intent could seize the occasion to take advantage of her in one way or another. This social mistreatment could also apply to the *orphan* as well.

Even though *an orphan* does not have a male figure to protect and defend him, *the LORD* was and is still “a father of the fatherless and a judge for the widows” (Psalm 68:5, Deuteronomy 10:18). God did not want anyone to mistreat them. The principle of “love your neighbor” applied to *widows and orphans* as well.

The LORD also loves *the stranger*. The term for *stranger* refers to an alien, someone residing in a foreign country (Deuteronomy 24:17). As a non-Israelite, the *alien* sometimes did not enjoy the same privileges given to Israelite citizens, as is the case in any country today. But the Israelite law accorded him full participation and acceptance into the Israelite community, provided he agreed to be circumcised and follow the Jewish rituals (Exodus 12:48–49). Thus, as a full-fledged member of the covenant community, the *alien* was to receive equal status under the law. That explains why *the LORD* “shows His love for the alien by giving him food and clothing” (Deuteronomy 10:18).

The LORD shows equal concern for the *poor*, those who can barely have the minimum to survive. A *poor* man often depended on his daily wages to provide for his family or to put food on his table. In ancient Israel, this precarious condition could happen because the *poor* man had lost family land or other means of independent income. As a result, his only option was to work for someone else to make a living. In Deuteronomy, *the LORD* instructed the Israelites to care for such people:

“If there is a poor man with you, one of your brothers, in any of your towns in your land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart, nor close your hand from your poor brother; but you shall freely open your hand to him, and shall generously lend him sufficient for his need in whatever he lacks.”
(Deuteronomy 15:7–8)

The last mandate reads, *Do not devise evil in your hearts against one another* (vs 10). To *devise evil* is to think of ways to exploit other people. This mode of thinking is the opposite of “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39). For “love does no wrong to a neighbor” (Romans 13:10). Instead, it allows the citizens of a self-governing society to live in harmony with each other, caring for one another, and protecting one another. In Zechariah, *the LORD* told His covenant people He prioritized these qualities over fasting and feasting.

The core principle behind God’s covenant/treaty with Israel was for them to love and care for one another. This principle relating to the poor was to “lend”—which is to say it was to help them out of a hole to get back to a point of economic self-sufficiency. Each person has dignity, and should be treated as capable, and given opportunity to thrive. But Israel had sunk into exploitation. They were taking advantage rather than helping.

Prior to Judah’s exile to Babylon, God had sent the *prophets* to warn them they were disobeying the tenants of His covenant/treaty with Israel, and accordingly were going to experience the

corrective provisions for disobedience if they did not repent (Deuteronomy 28:25-68). God did not seek more religious observance. Rather, He desired His people to love one another and do justice for all (Amos 5:23–24).

But they refused to pay attention (vs 11). That means they ignored the divine stipulations (Jeremiah 11:10). Instead of taking notice of God’s warnings, the Jewish people *turned a stubborn shoulder* and refused to change their ways. As a result, the covenant provision for disobedience was invoked, and they were driven into exile to Babylon (Deuteronomy 28:36).

The term *stubborn* means “morally obstinate” or “hard of the neck.” In the Psalms, it is used for the “horse or the mule which have no understanding, whose trappings include bit and bridle to hold them in check” (Psalm 32:9). The expression *turn a stubborn shoulder* thus means that the people of Judah were unwilling to obey the divine ordinances, as they had promised to do (Exodus 19:8). They turned their heads away like a mule *and stopped their ears from hearing* (v 11, Nehemiah 9:29). They were rebellious, and refused to acknowledge that their rebellion against their covenant with God was destined to result in the invocation of the covenant’s enforcement provisions (Deuteronomy 28:15-68).

The prophet continued to describe the people’s rebellion. He said, *They made their hearts like flint* (vs 12). The term *flint* refers to a hard grey rock. Its chipped edges served as a surgical cutting tool for the ancient Israelites (Exodus 4:25, Joshua 5:2). Because of its hardness, Zechariah employed it to portray the stubborn disobedience of the people of God (Ezekiel 3:9). The prophets warned them that the enforcement provisions of their covenant/treaty agreement with God would be invoked if they did not listen and repent, but they refused to listen.

Zechariah then tells us why the former generations of Israelites *made their hearts as hard as flint*. It was *so that they could not hear* (vs 12). They did not want to hear, so they hardened their hearts. This is another way of saying the Judeans living in the land before the Babylonian exile fortified their hearts against the fear of God. While *the LORD* urged them to repent, they made up their mind that they would not *hear*. That was their predisposition.

The verb translated as *hear* is “shema” in the Hebrew text (Deuteronomy 6:4). It describes both the mental activity of hearing and its effects. In other words, the one who hears the divine precepts would be expected to understand, and therefore follow. But the people of Judah had plugged their ears. Specifically, the people did not want to obey *the law and the words which the LORD of hosts had sent by His Spirit through the former prophets* (vs 12). They did not want to follow God’s ways, so they hardened their hearts against listening to Him.

The term *law* (“Torah” in Hebrew) refers to the first five books of Moses, and refers to the instructions of teachings God gave Israel on how to construct a thriving culture and society. The *words the LORD had sent by His Spirit through the former prophets* refer to the words spoken by *prophets*, some of which we have recorded in the prophetic books of the Bible. The term *Spirit* is “rûah” in Hebrew, which can also be translated as “wind” or “breath.” It tells us that the *Spirit* of God was the divine agent speaking to the people, while the *prophets* were the human instruments (Nehemiah 9:30).

The *Spirit* of God moved the *prophets* to speak the truth (2 Timothy 3:16, 2 Peter 1:21). The people hardened their hearts, and refused to listen. Accordingly, they suffered the consequences of their choice, as God had spelled out (Deuteronomy 30:19, 28:15-68).

Before Jerusalem fell to the Babylonian empire, the *prophets* had called Judah to return to the LORD to avoid divine judgment (Joel 2:12–14). They were to abandon their wicked ways and turn to God in faith that His ways were the path to their greatest blessing. They were to keep their covenant vow to God, who chose them as His “own possession among all the peoples” (Exodus 19:5).

But as the *former prophets* called the people to “seek God that you may live” (Amos 5:6), the people of Judah hardened their hearts to ignore the warning: *Therefore, great wrath came from the LORD of hosts* (vs 12).

That *great wrath came from the LORD* means that the LORD disciplined His people. Scripture asserts that God disciplines those whom He loves (Proverbs 3:11-12, Hebrews 12:5-6, Revelation 3:19).

God’s *wrath* is often conveyed by giving offenders over to the natural negative consequences of their bad choices (Romans 1:18, 24, 26, 28). In this case, God’s *wrath* also includes giving the people of Judah over to the nations in whom they trusted (Ezekiel 16:35-39). Judah decided to copy their neighbors by exploiting rather than loving one another. God’s *wrath* was then to allow the exploiters to become the exploited.

After describing the response of the disobedient Judeans living in the land prior to the Babylonian exile, Zechariah outlined the divine answer. He stated, *And just as He called and they would not listen, so they called and I would not listen* (vs 13).

God’s *wrath* included a divine version of “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Since the people would not listen to God, God treated them in the same manner. It is worth noting that the central point in the model prayer Jesus taught to His disciples is:

“And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.”
([Matthew 6:12](#))

The prayer we are instructed to pray here is “God, please forgive me to the extent I have forgiven others.” Jesus explains this after the model prayer, saying, “For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you” (Matthew 6:14). This Divine Golden Rule is also supported a few verses later, when Jesus says:

“For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you.”
(Matthew 7:2)

These passages all underscore that a major emphasis in God's application of justice is to treat people in the same manner as they treated their fellow humans. In this case, Judah was exploiting, so God turned them over to the Babylonians to be exploited.

The pronoun *I* in the phrase *so they called and I would not listen* stands for *the LORD*. The prophet suddenly switched from the third person pronoun to the first to remind his audience that he was not the primary author of the message. Instead, *the LORD* was the source of the revelation. Zechariah added the prophetic formula '*says the LORD of hosts*' to add more weight to the message (v. 9, v. 12).

Throughout Scripture, *the LORD* called His covenant people to obey His commandments wholeheartedly—to keep their vow and obey the provisions of the treaty they had entered with the LORD (Deuteronomy 5:32, Joshua 1:7). But they had a history of breaking their vow, and wandering far from Him. Time and time again, He lovingly pleaded, "Return to Me, that I may return to you" (Zechariah 1:3, Malachi 3:7).

However, the people did not *listen* to Him. Therefore, God would respond appropriately by allowing them to experience justice. Yes, He would "hide His face from them" because they refused to obey Him (Micah 3:4). When they cried out to Him, He would not hear them. Instead, He *scattered them with a storm wind* (vs 14).

A *storm wind* is a dangerous natural force accompanying storms at sea (Psalm 107:25, 29, Jonah 1:4, 11–13). It evokes images of destruction and stirs up feelings of helplessness and terror. The sea is often used as an image of the chaotic and destructive forces of the nations of the world, as when the beast of Revelation rises from the sea (Revelation 13:1). The image here is that God removed His hand of protection and gave Judah over to the violent nations as their judgment.

God dispersed His covenant people *among all the nations whom they have not known* (vs 14). Judah was exiled because of their unfaithfulness to keep their covenant vows (1 Chronicles 9:1). They were exiled per the terms of the covenant/treaty into which they had entered (Deuteronomy 28:41,64). The phrase *they have not known* can also be translated "where they were strangers." That means the Judeans lived in lands where they were foreigners, outsiders. They were like strangers *among the other nations*.

This verse echoes a curse associated with the covenant Yahweh had established with His people in Deuteronomy, if they broke their covenant vow. There, Moses warned the people and stated:

"The LORD will bring you and your king, whom you set over you, to a nation which neither you nor your fathers have known, and there you shall serve other gods, wood and stone."
(Deuteronomy 28:36)

The Babylonian exile fulfilled this curse. The covenant people, whom *the LORD* chose as His treasured possession, rebelled against His laws and fell under His disciplinary actions, as they had agreed would be the case. He used the Babylonians as His tool to send His people into captivity (Habakkuk 1:6). Thus, *the land is desolated behind them so that no one went back and forth* (vs 14).

The *land* refers to the area where the Judeans had lived before the Babylonian exile. It is the covenant grant that *the LORD* had promised to Abraham and the subsequent Israelite generations (Genesis 15:18, Deuteronomy 34:4). It was “a land flowing with milk and honey” (Exodus 3:17). Under the leadership of Joshua, the successor of Moses, the Israelites (and the Judeans) entered and possessed the *land* (Joshua 3). The northern kingdom of Israel disobeyed God and refused to turn to Him in faith. Consequently, He “was very angry with Israel and removed them from His sight” (2 Kings 17:18).

The southern kingdom of Judah followed her sister Israel and also broke their covenant vow. They too rebelled against God’s divine precepts. Consequently, God allowed the Babylonians to invade the Judean land. When the people of Judah left their homeland to go into captivity, there were no workers to cultivate the land (2 Kings 25:11-12).

They remained in exile for the period that the Suzerain God had fixed. Nobody *went back and forth* to Judah, *for they* (the Babylonians) *made the pleasant land desolate* (vs 14). The *pleasant land* refers to the Promised Land (Jeremiah 3:19). The disobedience of the Judeans prompted God to reverse their fortunes. Thus, the productive *land* became *desolate*.

The word *desolate* might refer to its emptiness. Babylon emptied the land from most of its inhabitants. Only a few poor people were left behind as laborers (2 Kings 25:11-12).

By way of application it is worth noting that our deeds always carry consequences. God designed the world with a moral cause-effect, just as He did with cause-effect in physics. When we make choices to live apart from God’s good design, we separate ourselves from His blessing. Death is separation, which is why the consequence of sin (living apart from God’s design) is death (being separated from God’s design for creation) (Romans 6:23).

Throughout scripture, God offers humanity the basic choice of life or death; and leaves it up to us. This was true with Adam and Eve (Genesis 2:17). It was true with Israel (Deuteronomy 30:19). It is true for New Testament believers (Galatians 6:8). Through Zechariah, God is reminding Judah that their choices have consequences, and urging them to make good choices. We can learn from their example, rather than having to learn from experience in making bad choices ourselves (1 Corinthians 10:11).

Biblical Text

⁸ Then the word of the LORD came to Zechariah saying, ⁹ “Thus has the LORD of hosts said, ‘Dispense true justice and practice kindness and compassion each to his brother; ¹⁰ and do not oppress the widow or the orphan, the stranger or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.’ ¹¹ But they refused to pay attention and turned a stubborn shoulder and stopped their ears from hearing. ¹² They made their hearts *like* flint so that they could not hear the law and the words which the LORD of hosts had sent by His Spirit through the former prophets; therefore, great wrath came from the LORD of hosts. ¹³ And just as He called and they would not listen, so they called and I would not listen,” says the LORD of hosts; ¹⁴ “but I scattered them with a storm wind

among all the nations whom they have not known. Thus, the land is desolated behind them so that no one went back and forth, for they made the pleasant land desolate.”