

A QUESTION FOR THE LORD
ZECHARIAH 7:1-7

For many years now, at the beginning of every year, I have preached a series of two sermons on essential spiritual disciplines: Bible and prayer. Then a few years ago I started also preaching a sermon on evangelism and the gospel. We need these yearly reminders of the basics of the spiritual life and the necessity of practicing the basics of spiritual disciplines.

We are thankful that the Lord has revealed Himself to us in His Word and that we have fellowship with Him through Bible and prayer. We teach the disciplines at the first of every year — and in Faith Fit, and Precept, and the counseling room, and AWANA, and in membership interviews, and in virtually all we do. The disciplines are important — even essential and crucial.

But it is also easy to get confused by what we gain from the disciplines. It is tempting to think that if we miss one morning of Bible reading that God is greatly displeased and will work against us all that day and make our day miserable. And we are also tempted to think that when we are faithful to the disciplines that God loves us more than when we miss them and that all will go well all that day. With both those thoughts we are equating the disciplines with a lucky rabbit's foot, Aladdin's lamp, or some other charm.

The Lord's favor is not gained by outward obedience to rituals and traditions. The Lord's favor is experienced as a gift from Him to those who are internally humble and contrite before Him. Obedience to God matters, but obedience that is based on what He has said and obedience that flows from a heart that desires to joyful obey is what He desires. The passage before us in Zechariah 7 will illustrate it this way:

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES PLEASE THE LORD WHEN THEY ARE DONE FROM A HEART TO PLEASE HIM.

We might say it another way — *spiritual disciplines don't please the Lord without the right motive.*

One of the lessons we learn from Job is that we never want to get into a Q&A debate with God. When we ask questions that suppose self-righteousness, we can expect correction and rebuke from the Lord, and that is exactly what the characters who questioned God in this passage experienced. Let's **observe** what God teaches the restored nation of Israel about spiritual disciplines (and specifically the discipline of fasting) and the habits of the heart through a series of questions.

1. A Question from the People About Fasting (vv. 1-3)

- ✓ The biblical practice of fasting
- ✓ The historical context of this question (vv. 1-2)
- ✓ The nature of this question (v. 3)

2. Two Questions from the Lord About Fasting (vv. 4-6)

- ✓ "Why are you fasting?" (vv. 4-5)
- ✓ "Are you fasting for self-glory?" (v. 6)

3. A Reminder from the Past About Fasting and Obedience (v. 7)

1. A Question from the People About Fasting (vv. 1-3)

• The biblical practice of fasting

- ✓ The biblical practice of fasting is an act of self-denial or self-discipline in which some regular activity is given up *for the sake of a spiritual goal*. Typically, the abstinence is from food.
 - In contrast to how it is used culturally today, the Bible never speaks of its physical benefits. It is always done in the context of some spiritual purpose (e.g., 1 Cor. 7:3ff).
 - Fasting was an act of humility, often related to sorrow or grief over sin (Neh 9:1-2).
 - Sometimes fasting accompanied a special prayer, sometimes out of anguish, danger, or desperation (Judg. 20:26; 2 Sam. 1:12; 2 Chron. 20:3; Esth. 4:16).
 - The Pharisees fasted twice weekly (Monday and Thursday) — evidently to commemorate Moses' ascent and descent on Mt. Sinai (Lk. 18:12).
 - Even in the OT it is rejected when it is formal and hypocritical (Is. 58:3-7; Jer. 14:10-12)
- ✓ There is only one biblical command for fasting — the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29-34; 23:26-32).
- ✓ There are no NT commands to fast, though there are examples of fasting (2 Cor. 6:4-5) and permission of fasting and even an expectation of fasting (Mt. 6:16-18).
- ✓ Jesus clarified that fasting is to be done privately, not publicly. In a Biblical fast, no one else will know someone is or has fasted.
- ✓ Summary: In Scripture, when followers of God fasted, it was a sign of the depth of their need and a demonstration of the significance of their need in prayer — they are dependent:

“...what fasting meant was that the individual was renouncing the natural demands of his body and the natural joys of eating, and registering a total dependence upon God. He was trusting God to sustain him day by day as he ate food. When he abstained from food, he was trusting God to sustain him in a supernatural way....The fast, then, registered a total dependence upon God in a time of sorrow, distress, sympathy, confession of sin, or in a time of prayer.” [Pentecost, *Design for Living*, 146.]

• The historical context of this question (vv. 1-2)

- ✓ The events of chapters 7-8 take place on *the fourth day of the ninth month...*
- ✓ Zechariah is specific about the day, so we know that it was December 7, 518 B.C. — about 22 months after the visions in chapters 1-6 (1:1).
- ✓ These events are 2-3 years prior to the completion of the temple (date is debated; Ezra 6:14-15).
 - While there was opposition to the re-construction of the Temple, it is now about half finished.
 - The altar had been rebuilt and sacrifices had been re-instituted (Ezra 3:3).
 - They were hopeful! Their circumstances did not look nearly as bleak as two years earlier.
- ✓ So, a delegation (optimistically) arrives from the city of **Bethel** (about 12 mi. north of Jerusalem).

- Bethel had been a center of apostate worship under Jeroboam (1 Kings 12:28-29, essentially reinstating the golden calf debacle from the wilderness).
- After the Babylonian captivity, some 223 Jews settled in and rebuilt Bethel/Ai (Ezra 2:28)
- Included in the delegation were **Sharezer** and **Regemmelech** — Jews who evidently been born in Babylon (their names are foreign) and had returned to Israel. Perhaps Regemmelech was an emissary of the Babylonian king, and also doing business for him on this venture.
- Others were with them (**their men**), but we don't know how many. Because they are identified as being sent by the leaders of Bethel, it is reasonable to assume they were prominent citizens.
- Why did they go to Jerusalem? They came **to seek favor from the Lord** — to seek help in a time of need. Often **favor** is used in confession of sin, needing the help of God's forgiveness. This delegation had a different agenda.

- The nature of this question (v. 3)

- ✓ Given the progress of the work on the temple and the expectation of its completion, it seemed reasonable for Bethelites to make their request.
- ✓ The appeal was to the **priests**, who were the arbiters on all things related to the Law (Dt. 17:9) and to the **prophets**, likely Zechariah and Haggai.
- ✓ They knowingly made their requests to the priests of **the house of the Lord of hosts** — remember that title refers to God's omnipotence — YHWH Almighty. It refers to God's authority — and is referenced throughout these two chapters (23x; and 53x in the book).
- ✓ Their request is simple — **shall I** (continue to) **weep in the fifth month and abstain...**
 - They were grieving and fasting (abstaining from food) because of the Babylonian captivity.
 - But remember that this was *not a God-imposed fast*; it was entirely voluntary. In fact, we know from v. 5 and from 8:19 that they were practicing *four fasts* —
 - ... The fast of the **tenth month** marked the beginning of the siege against Jerusalem in January 588 B.C. (2 Kings 25:1)
 - ... The fast of the **fourth month** remembered the taking of Jerusalem in July 586 B.C. (Jer. 39:2) — 2-1/2 years after the siege began
 - ... The fast of the **fifth month** was the most significant because it related to the burning and destruction of the Temple (2 Kings 25:8) — August, 586 B.C.
 - ... The fast of the **seventh month** remembered the assassination of Gedaliah, the Jewish governor appointed by Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kings 25:25) — October (581? B.C.). This was grievous to the nation because the assassination was an act against the control of Babylon and thus increased Babylon's hostility against the nation (was it a self-serving fast?).
 - They had fasted for **these many years** (70, v. 5), a reference to the entire Babylonian captivity.
 - So for 70 years, they were in a deeply regular cycle of grief that now seemed to be ending.
 - They came to the priests and prophets asking, "is it ok not to grieve anymore?"

2. Two Questions from the Lord About Fasting (vv. 4-6) — The Lord answers with questions (there are actually four responses from God to the question — 7:4; 7:8; 8:1; 8:18).

• “Why are you fasting?” (vv. 4-5)

- ✓ The answer to the question comes from the **Lord of Hosts** (v. 4) — omnipotent, authoritative God
- ✓ While the question seemed innocent and appropriate, God’s answer reveals that there was a problem with the Bethelites’ question — they were concerned with the outward while God was concerned with the inward. “Men are always looking for rules, but God gives them principles whereby they can conduct their lives under the Spirit’s direction.” [Feinberg, *MP*, 304.]
- ✓ The principle comes to them in the form of a question — and notice that while the question is from the Bethelites (v. 3), the answer is **to all the people of the land and priests** — this is a nationwide problem and a nationwide solution and answer. Zechariah answers for (and to) the priests.
- ✓ The question is direct and penetrating (Heb. 4:12) — **was it actually for me that you fasted?**
 - God is not opposed to their fasting. While only one fast was mandated in the OT, there was permission to conduct other fasts; fasting was appropriate. God does not nec. reject the fasting.
 - But they were concerned about the timing (**fifth and seventh months**) and duration (**70 years**) of the fasts. The Lord was unconcerned about “when?” He wanted to know “why?” (motive).
 - The pronoun is also emphatic, making the question boldly clear: “Fasting, did you fast to Me, Me/Myself?” The question expects a negative answer — “No, we did not.”
 - They had made a decision to fast to commemorate their grief and dependence on God (which was appropriate). They continued in that regular practice for decades (appropriate). But they missed the intent and purpose of the practice. They were self-exalting and self-focused in their practices, and were uninterested in expressing their love for and dependence on God.
 - Their fasting was about themselves and not about the Lord (sounds familiar — **Mt. 6:16-18**).
- ✓ Like the Israelites our service of Christ, our worship of God, our practice of disciplines, and our obedient acts of faith all can be undermined by ungodly motives and desires. God cares about what is in our hearts when we serve Him and worship Him (both corporately and privately).
 - It is not enough to worship God. He expects worship that emanates from a desire for Him.
 - That was true in the OT (Hos. 6:4-6; **Amos 4:4-5ff**; 5:21ff).
 - And it is true in the NT (**Mt. 15:5-9**; **Col. 2:22-23**).
 - Let’s not get caught in the trap of routinely doing right things without a heart that desires Him.
 - ... If you read your Bible without desiring to know Him, then repent and ask to see Him in what you read (**Ps. 119:18**; 2 Tim. 3:16-17)
 - ... If you give your money to Him joylessly, then repent (2 Cor. 9:7).
 - ... If you obey with your actions, but have a rebellious heart, then repent (**2 Cor. 5:12**; **Eph. 6:6**)
 - ... Legalistic, slavish obedience apart from the heart is a terrible trap and bondage. Worst, it does not please the Lord.

- “Are you fasting for self-glory?” (v. 6)

- ✓ The second question mirrors the first but is even more penetrating.
- ✓ The first question indicates that they had rejected the Lord and worshipping Him.
- ✓ The second question indicates that they were living for self-exaltation and worshipping self.
- ✓ The question is bold and clear — **do you not eat for yourselves...** The expected answer is “yes.”
 - They ate for themselves. And on the fourth, fifth, seventh, and tenth months, *they fasted for themselves*. The fasting was not for exalting God but for “feeding” self.
 - They were pre-occupied with themselves. The fast that was designed to express their joyful dependence on God instead was a massive expression of self-pity and self-reliance.
 - Spurgeon rightly understood the danger of self-sufficiency: “The danger of every Christian worker is that of falling into routine and self-sufficiency. We are most apt to do what we have been accustomed to do, and to do it half asleep.” [*Counsel for Christian Workers*]
 - God has a similar condemnation of Israel in **Isaiah 58:1-7**.
 - And God has a hope for the ending of the fast of Israel as well (**Is. 58:8-9**).
- ✓ The failure of the Bethelites was that they assumed the end of their persecution and suffering also meant the end of their dependence on God.
 - *Their failure and their rebuke from God was not because they wanted to end their fasts*. The fasts were irrelevant. But wanting to end the fasts exposed their desire not to be dependent.
 - They loved self-reliance and self-justification. They denigrated God-dependence.
 - They were tired of their spiritual practices (mainly because they were rituals and not reality) and they were weary of suffering and failed to see that their troubles were a means for God to reveal His gracious provision and care for them (including His loving fellowship).
 - They wanted out of their problem more than they wanted God. And God was not pleased.
- ✓ This is a reminder for us that everything we do — Bible, prayer, evangelism, service — has no meaning if it is done in self-pity, self-justification, or ritual. Our service of God only pleases Him when it is done for His glory (and I can’t help but wonder if Paul had this verse in mind when he wrote **1 Cor. 10:31**). Whatever we do — in our disciplines and service — we do for Him.

3. A Reminder from the Past About Fasting and Obedience (v. 7)

- Paul tells us that the OT is given to us as encouragement and exhortation not to do what they did so that we might avoid sin (**1 Cor. 10:11-12**). Learn from history; don’t repeat (evil) history.
- Having corrected the Bethelites and their question, the Lord also reminds them that they are venturing into an old sin practiced by their ancestors by asking them one more question.
 - ✓ **Are these not the words which the Lord proclaimed...** is a reference to earlier generations.
 - ✓ Those earlier words had expressed His zeal for heart obedience (Hosea, Amos, Isaiah...)

- ✓ When those words were given, ***Jerusalem was inhabited and prosperous*** — the city was full (i.e., not in captivity) and the land and people were prosperous — enjoying “good times.”
- ✓ The prosperity is also suggested by the reference to ***the Negev*** — the southern boundary of Israel.
 - It was mountainous and provided a natural border from enemies.
 - The ***lowlands*** were an area that was generally prosperous because of the rivers and streams flowing from the mountains. Occasionally these regions experienced dry conditions and invasions from the Philistines and others, but generally it was prosperous (as indicated in v. 7).
 - God’s point in his question is this — in times of prosperity the nation was given warnings from the Lord about ritualism and being hard-hearted, and the nation was rebellious and went into captivity in Babylon. If that happened then (during prosperity), to that generation, shouldn’t this generation also be warned and observe and obey in a manner that pleases the Lord?
 - The nation was experiencing renewed prosperity after returning from Babylon. That was no time to think lightly of their spiritual practices and their dependence on the Lord. That was all the more reason to express their dependence on God.
- We are experiencing an uncommon season of blessing in our church, corporately. This is no season to think, “we’ve arrived, we have no need of the Lord, we can back off what we have always done...”
- We may be experiencing uncommon seasons of spiritual blessing personally — your marriage is healthy, your children walking with Christ, you are enjoying ministry, etc.... If so, this is no season to think we have arrived personally and can “coast.” We have been, we are, we always will be wholly dependent on God for everything we have and everything we are. We are nothing without Him.
 - ✓ So last year we said, “We are doing well in loving each other — **excel still more...**”
 - ✓ This year we say, “We are doing well in a growing ministry — **equip the saints...**”
 - ✓ Because we are doing well, now is the time to press in all the more to faithful, heartfelt, dependent love of Christ and His work in our lives.

CONCLUSION: Spiritual disciplines and sacrifice and service do not inherently please the Lord. Our spiritual disciplines will please the Lord, like the Israelites of old, when we are motivated to do them by our love for Christ. So read, and pray, and study, and evangelize, and serve one another, and even fast if/when that is appropriate — but always do all those things because you love God and our Savior, Jesus Christ.

BENEDICTION: New member prayer — Aaron and Bekah Ball