

Zechariah Chapter 7 — True Fasting and Obedience

A Verse-by-Verse Bible Study from the Crawford Standard Bible

Introduction

Zechariah Chapter 7 addresses a question that sounds religious but exposes something much deeper.

The people wanted to know whether they should continue observing a traditional fast.

God answered by questioning the motive behind the fast itself.

Their real problem was not whether they should fast.

Their real problem was whether their hearts were truly turned toward Him.

For seventy years, the people had mourned over the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. But God asked a searching question:

“Was it really for Me that you fasted?”

This chapter teaches that religious activity means very little when the heart remains unchanged.

God is not impressed by ceremony without obedience.

He desires:

Justice.

Mercy.

Compassion.

Integrity.

A listening heart.

The chapter also looks back at the tragic history of Israel's rebellion and explains why judgment came.

The people refused to listen when God spoke.

Eventually, when they cried out, God refused to listen to them.

The message is sobering:

Outward religion cannot replace inward obedience.

I. A QUESTION ABOUT FASTING

Zechariah 7:1

“In the fourth year of King Darius, on the fourth day of the ninth month, the month of Kislev, the word of the Lord came to Zechariah.”

This message came approximately two years after the visions recorded earlier in the book.

The temple rebuilding project was progressing.

The people were moving closer to restoration.

But spiritual questions remained.

Once again, the important phrase is:

“The word of the Lord came.”

The issue would not be settled by tradition or human preference.

God Himself would answer.

Cross References in Simple American English

Haggai 2:10 — God gave Haggai a message during the reign of Darius concerning the spiritual condition of the people.

Nehemiah 1:1 — Nehemiah also received important news during the month of Kislev.

Daniel 1:21 — Daniel continued serving through changing kingdoms, showing God's faithfulness across generations.

Spiritual Lesson

Questions about worship should be answered by God's Word rather than human tradition alone.

Application

When religious practices become familiar, ask:

What does God actually desire?

Zechariah 7:2

“The people of Bethel sent Sherezer and Regem-Melech with their men to seek the Lord's favor.”

A delegation came from Bethel.

Their purpose was to seek God's favor.

This sounds commendable.

Bethel had a complicated history.

It had once been associated with worship of God but later became a center of idolatrous worship in the northern kingdom.

Now people from Bethel were seeking direction from the Lord.

Cross References in Simple American English

1 Kings 12:29 — Jeroboam placed one of his golden calves at Bethel.

2 Kings 17:28 — A priest was sent to Bethel to teach people about the Lord after the northern kingdom had fallen.

Jeremiah 26:19 — People sometimes sought God's favor by responding seriously to prophetic warnings.

Spiritual Lesson

A religious history does not guarantee present faithfulness.

Application

Places, churches, and people can have spiritual history while still needing renewed devotion to God.

Zechariah 7:3

“By asking the priests of the house of the Lord Almighty and the prophets: ‘Should we keep mourning and fasting in the fifth month, as we have done for many years?’”

The people had observed a fast in the fifth month for many years.

This fast commemorated the destruction of the temple by Babylon.

But now the temple was being rebuilt.

So the question seemed reasonable:

Should we keep fasting?

Yet God would reveal that the deeper issue was not whether the fast continued.

The issue was why they had fasted in the first place.

Cross References in Simple American English

Joel 1:14 — God's people were called to a sacred fast during a time of national crisis.

2 Samuel 12:16 — David fasted and prayed during a time of deep sorrow.

Esther 4:16 — Esther called the Jews to fast during a time of danger.

Key Principle

A good religious practice can become empty when the heart is not involved.

Application

Fasting, praying, giving, and worship are valuable only when they flow from genuine devotion.

II. GOD’S RESPONSE TO EMPTY RITUALS

Zechariah 7:4

“Then the word of the Lord Almighty came to me.”

Before answering the people's question, God shifts the focus.

They wanted a simple yes-or-no answer.

God instead examined their hearts.

Cross References in Simple American English

Jeremiah 14:11 — God responded directly to Jeremiah concerning the people's spiritual condition.

Isaiah 58:3 — The people complained about fasting, but God exposed their wrong motives.

Amos 5:4 — God called His people to seek Him rather than depend upon empty religion.

Spiritual Lesson

God often answers the question beneath our question.

Zechariah 7:5

“Tell all the people of the land and the priests: When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months for seventy years, was it really for Me that you fasted?”

This is the central question.

“Was it really for Me?”

The people had fasted for seventy years.

That is a long religious tradition.

But length of practice does not prove sincerity.

The fifth-month fast remembered the temple's destruction.

The seventh-month fast likely remembered the assassination of Gedaliah after Jerusalem's fall.

Yet God asks whether these observances were genuinely centered on Him.

Were they mourning over sin?

Or merely mourning over consequences?

Cross References in Simple American English

Isaiah 58:5 — God rejected fasting that was merely outward and did not produce genuine humility.

Matthew 6:16 — Jesus warned people not to fast merely to impress others.

Jeremiah 25:11 — Judah's seventy years of desolation came because of persistent rebellion.

Key Truth

Religious activity can become self-centered.

Application

Ask:

Do I worship God because I love Him?

Or because I want something from Him?

Zechariah 7:6

“And when you eat and drink, are you not doing it simply for yourselves?”

God exposes the heart further.

Their fasting had been self-centered.

Their feasting was also self-centered.

Whether abstaining or enjoying food, the focus remained on themselves.

The issue was not food.

The issue was motive.

Cross References in Simple American English

1 Corinthians 10:31 — Whether you eat or drink, do everything for the glory of God.

Deuteronomy 8:10 — After eating and being satisfied, God's people were commanded to bless the Lord.

Luke 12:19 — The rich fool lived only for his own comfort and pleasure.

Principle

Even ordinary activities should be lived for God's glory.

Application

True spirituality is not limited to church services.

It affects eating.

Working.

Resting.

Spending.

Relationships.

Everything.

Zechariah 7:7

“Should you not have listened to the words proclaimed by the earlier prophets when Jerusalem was prosperous and full of people, with its towns around it, and when the Negev and the western foothills were still inhabited?”

God reminds them that the earlier prophets had warned previous generations before disaster came.

The problem had never been lack of revelation.

They had heard.

They simply had not obeyed.

Jerusalem had once been prosperous.

The surrounding regions had been inhabited.

Yet prosperity did not protect them from the consequences of rebellion.

Cross References in Simple American English

Jeremiah 33:13 — Judah's towns were once places of normal life and activity.

Isaiah 1:19 — God promised blessing to those willing to obey Him.

2 Chronicles 36:15 — God repeatedly sent prophets because He had compassion on His people.

Spiritual Lesson

Warning before judgment is an expression of God's mercy.

Application

Do not wait for consequences before taking God's Word seriously.

III. THE CALL FOR JUSTICE AND MERCY

Zechariah 7:8

“Again the word of the Lord came to Zechariah.”

God now explains what He had always wanted from His people.

The answer is not more ceremony.

It is obedient character.

Cross References in Simple American English

Jonah 3:1 — God's Word came again to Jonah, giving another opportunity for obedience.

Ezekiel 3:16 — God's Word came to Ezekiel with responsibility to speak faithfully.

1 Kings 17:2 — Elijah acted in response to the word of the Lord.

Key Principle

God's expectations have always been clearly revealed.

Zechariah 7:9

“This is what the Lord Almighty says: Administer true justice. Show mercy and compassion to one another.”

Here God identifies the kind of religion He desires.

True justice.

Mercy.

Compassion.

Justice means dealing honestly and fairly.

Mercy means showing kindness to those in need.

Compassion means allowing another person's suffering to move us to action.

Cross References in Simple American English

Micah 6:8 — God requires His people to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with Him.

Isaiah 1:17 — God's people are commanded to seek justice and defend the oppressed.

Hosea 6:6 — God desires faithful love more than empty sacrifice.

Key Truth

True worship affects the way we treat people.

Application

A person cannot mistreat others all week and then assume religious activity on Sunday makes everything right.

Zechariah 7:10

“Do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the foreigner, or the poor. Do not plot evil against one another in your hearts.”

God specifically identifies vulnerable people.

The widow.

The fatherless.

The foreigner.

The poor.

These groups often lacked social power and protection.

God commanded His people not to exploit them.

Then He moves even deeper:

“Do not plot evil against one another in your hearts.”

God does not judge only outward behavior.

He sees motives.

Cross References in Simple American English

Exodus 22:21 — Israel was commanded not to mistreat or oppress foreigners.

Deuteronomy 24:17 — God's people were forbidden from denying justice to foreigners and orphans.

James 1:27 — Pure religion includes caring for orphans and widows in their trouble.

Spiritual Lesson

God's concern for justice reaches both behavior and motives.

Application

Ask not only:

What am I doing?

Also ask:

What am I planning and desiring in my heart?

IV. ISRAEL'S HARD-HEARTED REBELLION

Zechariah 7:11

“But they refused to pay attention. They stubbornly turned their backs and covered their ears.”

The previous generation had heard God's commands.

But they deliberately refused to listen.

Three actions describe their rebellion:

They refused to pay attention.

They turned their backs.

They covered their ears.

This was not ignorance.

It was resistance.

Cross References in Simple American English

Acts 7:57 — Stephen's hearers covered their ears because they did not want to hear the truth.

Nehemiah 9:29 — Israel repeatedly acted proudly and refused to listen to God's commands.

Jeremiah 7:24 — The people followed their own stubborn hearts rather than obeying God.

Key Truth

Repeated resistance to truth produces spiritual hardness.

Application

Every time we hear truth, we respond somehow.

We either soften toward God or harden ourselves against Him.

Zechariah 7:12

“They made their hearts as hard as stone and would not listen to the law or to the words the Lord Almighty had sent by His Spirit through the earlier prophets. So the Lord Almighty was very angry.”

This verse explains the seriousness of their rebellion.

Their hearts became hard as stone.

They resisted both:

The Law.

The prophetic Word.

Notice also that God says He sent His message:

“by His Spirit through the earlier prophets.”

This is an important statement about the inspiration of Scripture.

The prophets spoke, but the Holy Spirit was behind the message.

Cross References in Simple American English

Ezekiel 11:19 — God promised to remove the heart of stone and give His people a responsive heart.

Ezekiel 36:26 — God promised a new heart and a new spirit.

Hebrews 3:15 — Believers are warned not to harden their hearts when they hear God's voice.

Key Doctrine

The Holy Spirit spoke through the prophets.

Application

Rejecting God's Word is ultimately resistance to God Himself.

Zechariah 7:13

“When I called, they would not listen; so when they called, I would not listen,” says the Lord Almighty.”

This is one of the most sobering statements in the chapter.

God called.

They refused.

Later they called.

God refused.

This does not mean God is unwilling to hear genuine repentance.

Rather, it describes judicial consequences for persistent rebellion.

They wanted God's help without wanting God's authority.

Cross References in Simple American English

Proverbs 1:24 — Wisdom warns that those who continually refuse instruction may eventually cry out too late.

Isaiah 1:15 — God refused to accept prayers from people whose lives remained full of injustice.

Micah 3:4 — Wicked leaders would cry to God, but He would not answer because of their evil actions.

Key Principle

We should not expect to ignore God's voice while demanding that He respond to ours.

Application

Prayer and obedience belong together.

Zechariah 7:14

“I scattered them with a whirlwind among nations they did not know. The land they left behind was so desolate that no one traveled through it. They turned the pleasant land into a wilderness.”

The chapter ends by explaining the consequences of rebellion.

God scattered His people among foreign nations.

The land became desolate.

The pleasant land became wilderness.

Notice the final wording:

“They turned the pleasant land into a wilderness.”

God judged them, but their rebellion brought the destruction.

Sin destroys what God intended for blessing.

Cross References in Simple American English

Leviticus 26:33 — God warned Israel that continued rebellion would result in scattering among the nations.

Jeremiah 9:10 — Jeremiah mourned because the land had become desolate.

2 Kings 25:21 — Judah was carried away from its land into exile.

Spiritual Lesson

Sin can turn blessing into desolation.

Application

Never underestimate the destructive power of persistent disobedience.

V. MAJOR THEMES OF ZECHARIAH 7

1. Religious Ritual Is Not Enough

Fasting can be spiritual.

But fasting without genuine devotion is empty.

2. God Examines Motives

The question was not only:

Did you fast?

The question was:

Was it for Me?

3. True Worship Produces Justice

God connects worship with how we treat others.

4. God Cares for the Vulnerable

Widows, orphans, foreigners, and the poor matter deeply to Him.

5. The Heart Matters

God forbids not only outward oppression but inward plots of evil.

6. Repeated Disobedience Hardens the Heart

The people eventually made their hearts like stone.

7. The Holy Spirit Speaks Through Scripture

God sent His words by His Spirit through the prophets.

8. Ignoring God's Voice Has Consequences

Those who repeatedly refused to listen eventually experienced judgment.

VI. FASTING IN THE BIBLE

Zechariah 7 does not condemn fasting itself.

Scripture contains many examples of legitimate fasting.

People fasted during:

Repentance.

Grief.

National crisis.

Prayer.

Seeking God's guidance.

The problem was not fasting.

The problem was self-centered fasting.

True Fasting

True fasting should:

Turn our attention toward God.

Accompany sincere prayer.

Lead to repentance.

Produce humility.

Increase dependence upon God.

False Fasting

False fasting:

Seeks attention.

Becomes tradition without devotion.

Focuses on self.

Leaves sinful behavior unchanged.

Key Principle

The spiritual value of fasting depends upon the heart behind it.

VII. TRUE RELIGION ACCORDING TO ZECHARIAH 7

God's answer in verses 9–10 gives a practical definition of authentic faith.

Administer True Justice

Be fair.

Be honest.

Do what is right.

Show Mercy

Do not give people only what they deserve.

Show kindness.

Show Compassion

Enter into the suffering of others.

Protect the Vulnerable

Use strength to help rather than exploit.

Refuse Evil in the Heart

Holiness begins internally.

Spiritual Lesson

True religion is not merely ceremonial.

It is relational and moral.

VIII. GOD'S CONCERN FOR THE VULNERABLE

Throughout Scripture, God repeatedly identifies Himself as the defender of those who are easily exploited.

The widow often lacked financial protection.

The fatherless lacked family security.

The foreigner lacked social standing.

The poor lacked economic power.

God commanded His people to care for them.

Application

A society's spiritual health can often be measured by how it treats people with little power.

The same is true of churches.

And individuals.

IX. THE DANGER OF A HARD HEART

The progression in verses 11–12 is important.

First they refused attention.

Then they turned away.

Then they stopped listening.

Then their hearts became hard.

Hardness usually develops gradually.

A person hears God's Word.

He resists.

He hears again.

He resists again.

Eventually, resistance becomes habit.

Warning

Never make a habit of saying no to God.

X. CHRIST IN ZECHARIAH 7

Zechariah 7 primarily confronts hypocrisy and rebellion, but its themes lead us toward Christ.

1. Christ Condemned Empty Religion

Jesus repeatedly confronted religious leaders who practiced outward rituals while neglecting justice, mercy, and faithfulness.

2. Christ Shows Perfect Compassion

Jesus cared for the poor, sick, rejected, widowed, and outcast.

He demonstrated the compassion God required from Israel.

3. Christ Gives a New Heart

Israel's heart became hard as stone.

Through the new covenant, God promises heart transformation.

Christ provides the salvation through which sinners receive new life.

4. Christ Perfectly Obeyed the Father

Where Israel refused God's voice, Jesus could say that He always did what pleased the Father.

XI. KEY LESSONS FROM ZECHARIAH 7

1. Religious activity without sincerity is empty.

God looks beyond ceremony to the heart.

2. Motives matter.

The question is not merely what we do, but why we do it.

3. True worship produces righteous living.

Justice, mercy, and compassion are essential.

4. God cares deeply for vulnerable people.

His people must do the same.

5. Sin begins in the heart.

God forbids plotting evil before it becomes action.

6. Repeated disobedience hardens the heart.

Resistance can become spiritual insensitivity.

7. God speaks through His Word by His Spirit.

Scripture must be taken seriously.

8. Ignoring God's voice brings consequences.

The people refused Him until judgment came.

XII. PERSONAL APPLICATION

Zechariah 7 challenges us to ask:

Am I practicing religion mainly from habit?

Do I worship God for Him, or mostly for what I hope to receive?

Is there a difference between my public worship and private life?

Do I treat others justly?

Do I show mercy?

Am I compassionate toward people who are vulnerable?

Is there anyone I am plotting against inwardly?

Have I become resistant to something God has repeatedly shown me?

Is my heart becoming softer or harder toward His Word?

XIII. QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL STUDY

Question 1

Why did the people send representatives to Jerusalem?

Answer

They wanted to ask whether they should continue fasting and mourning in the fifth month.

Question 2

What event had the fifth-month fast remembered?

Answer

It remembered the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by Babylon.

Question 3

What question did God ask about their fasting?

Answer

He asked whether they had truly been fasting for Him.

Question 4

Why was their fasting inadequate?

Answer

Because much of it had become self-centered ritual rather than genuine repentance and devotion.

Question 5

What did God say He really wanted from His people?

Answer

True justice, mercy, compassion, protection of the vulnerable, and hearts free from evil intentions.

Question 6

Which vulnerable groups are specifically mentioned?

Answer

Widows, orphans, foreigners, and the poor.

Question 7

How did the earlier generations respond to God's Word?

Answer

They refused to listen, turned their backs, covered their ears, and hardened their hearts.

Question 8

Who had spoken through the earlier prophets?

Answer

The Holy Spirit had sent God's Word through them.

Question 9

What happened after the people continually refused to listen?

Answer

When they later cried out, God did not answer them in the way they demanded.

Question 10

Why were the people scattered among the nations?

Answer

Their persistent rebellion and refusal to obey God brought covenant judgment.

Question 11

What happened to the land?

Answer

The pleasant land became desolate like a wilderness.

Question 12

What is the central message of Zechariah 7?

Answer

God desires sincere obedience, justice, mercy, and compassion rather than empty religious ritual.

XIV. FINAL THOUGHT

Zechariah Chapter 7 begins with a religious question:

“Should we keep fasting?”

God answers with a much deeper question:

“Was it really for Me?”

That question reaches far beyond fasting.

Why do we pray?

Why do we attend church?

Why do we give?

Why do we serve?

Why do we preach?

Why do we sing?

Why do we read Scripture?

Why do we fast?

Is it truly for God?

Or has religion become something centered on ourselves?

Zechariah 7 reminds us that God is not satisfied with outward forms while the heart remains unchanged.

He wants worship that produces justice.

Devotion that produces mercy.

Faith that produces compassion.

Religion that reaches the widow.

The orphan.

The foreigner.

The poor.

He wants ears that listen.

Hearts that remain soft.

Lives that obey.

The previous generation refused His voice.

They turned away.

They covered their ears.

They hardened their hearts.

And eventually the pleasant land became a wilderness.

That tragedy leaves us with a warning:

Do not harden your heart when God speaks.

Listen while He is calling.

Obey while His Word is before you.

Let worship become life.

Let fasting become devotion.

Let faith become compassion.

And let outward religion flow from a heart that truly belongs to God.

Key Verse

“Administer true justice. Show mercy and compassion to one another.” — Zechariah 7:9

Key Phrase

God desires obedient hearts, not empty rituals.