



# THE BOOK OF ZECHARIAH

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## THE GRIEF SIN AND OUR FUTURE: ZECHARIAH 7

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There are experiences designed by God that force us to ask important questions. The lowest experiences of suffering and the highest joys of glory are moments where we come face to face with important questions of who God is, who we are, what is the problem with our hearts, and what is the solution to this problem. In these moments, we have two options. First, we can resort to trite religious phrases or superficial religious activity. Second, we can draw close to Jesus and trust his goodness amid our suffering. Zechariah's audience opted for the first option throughout their exile. Instead of repenting from their sin that led to their exile, they resorted to superficial religious activity: they fasted. To be clear, fasting can be an expression of repentance, but here it is not since it was not accompanied by repentance.

The exile was one of these experiences for God's people living while Zechariah ministered. The exile forced God's people to ask the question of why. Why were they exiled? Were they exiled because of God's weakness? Were the Babylonians right about Marduk being stronger than the Lord? Were the Babylonians right when they said that the Lord did not care about them? The exile compelled these people to ask why they were exiled?

The homecoming of God's people back to their land in 538 was another experience designed by God to force them to ask important questions. One of these questions is the subject of Zechariah 7-8. The exiles ask if their future will be shaped by their past sin (7:1-3). Will our past's pain, grief, and sadness continue into eternal presents? Is our lot a destiny of suffering, sadness, and grief?

Zechariah answers this question in chapters 7-8, and we could divide this answer into two halves. First, in Zechariah 7, Zechariah explains the past of God's people. Second, in Zechariah 8, Zechariah describes the future of God's people. Overall, the answer from Zechariah 7 is that our past is shaped by the grief and pain of our sin. The answer from Zechariah 8 is that our future will be utterly different.

Let's explore this idea now together.

### **The Question of Ongoing Pain (7:1-3)**

The Lord gives the words of Zechariah 7-8 to Zechariah on the fourth day of the ninth month of the fourth year (7:1): the middle of July. It's been two years since the people repented (Zechariah 1:1-6) and a year and a half since the glorious eight-night visions of Zechariah 1-6 (Zechariah 1:7). Work on the temple is progressing well; it is about halfway done (see Ezra 6:15).

Ezra 5-6 describes the people as flourishing under Zechariah's preaching. Previously, God's people were insignificant politically and socially. Economically, they were impoverished, and they were less than blameless religiously.

536 to 520 was not a high moment in the history of God's people, but God used the preaching of Haggai and Zechariah to transform this reality. Sermons like the eight-night visions propelled God's people to rebuild the temple despite political and social opposition. Despite economic poverty, God's people prioritized rebuilding the temple. The word of Zechariah 7-8 comes to God's people after 2 years of prioritizing worship and bravery amid economic, social, and political pressures. This is the context for this question.

The question is a question about the future. They ask, "Should I weep and abstain in the fifth month, as I have done for so many years" (7:3)? God's people fasted and mourned the destruction of their city and temple throughout their exile several times a year, and they wonder if they should continue. The question is a question of the future: will our future continue to be characterized by our past sins? With the temple halfway complete, is it still a season of grief, pain, and mourning? This is the question brought to the priests and the prophets.

### **Fake Repentance (7:4-7)**

Zechariah speaks on behalf of the priests and prophets and provides the answer. Let's look at the different aspects of the answer. First, the people's past fasting was fake repentance (4-6). This is evident in verses 4-6 where the Lord asks rhetorically if their fasting was truly for the Lord. The answer is a resounding no since this fasting progressed throughout the exile (for more than seventy years), but was not accompanied by repentance until two years earlier. Before Haggai's and Zechariah's ministry, God's people fasted but continued to neglect the temple. They did not rebuild it.

Instead, they caved to political, social, and economic pressures. In their mind, it was not time to rebuild because doing so would have serious costs. They did not have the money to rebuild, the political clout to rebuild, or the social stamina to rebuild. They had reasons – worldly reasons – to neglect to rebuild the temple. So they replaced true obedience – the bravery to rebuild the temple despite the pressures – with the religious activity of fasting. This is fake repentance, and this is the word of verses 4-6.

The paradigm here is extensive, church family, and it appears often in Scripture and our own day. For example, Esau fell into the trap of fake repentance. According to Hebrews 12:16-17, Esau grieved over his sin but did not repent. We do the same thing. People come to me broken because of their sin, but as I press into them the questions needing answers – questions of how Jesus can make sense of pain, grief, and sin; questions about hope amid pain – they provide superficial answers or do some superficial religious deed and walk away. They cry some tears, experience some lament, and then content themselves with trite phrases like “it will all work out” or “we have to give it to God.” These moments of suffering are designed by God to draw us to Jesus; yet, the people Zechariah preaches to, Esau, and countless people today replace repentance with superficial religious activity and religious phraseology. The people of Zechariah’s day ask if the fasting should continue, and God’s initial response is to highlight the insincerity of this religious activity because it is void of life transformation.

Church family, moments of suffering are not designed to press us to do superficial things – like go to church for a few weeks – or say superficial things like God will work it out!



They are designed to show us how deeply and truly God satisfies. When nothing else does, Jesus satisfies, and experiencing this reality amid pain moves us to true repentance.

Second, fake repentance is a generational threat to God's people (6-7). This fact is evident when Zechariah says, "Were not these the words that the Lord proclaimed by the former prophets?" (7:7). The replacement of repentance with religious activity is not new, but old, since Zechariah says the same thing as the former prophets. The idea here is terrifying. Replacing repentance with religious activity is not an isolated act for God's people but affects the generations.

The thing about replacing repentance with superficial religious activity is that it blinds the person doing the superficial religious activity. We cannot see how fake the activity is, but our children can. They see us express religious devotion at church, but then come home and act less than godly. They see how we love morality more than Jesus when we shout at the sinners of the world, make jokes about them, or do nothing to try to reach them with the gospel. All of that is a replacement of true repentance with fake religious activity. Here is what's scary. Our children will do the same thing, but differently. They'll replace obedience with a different kind of fake religious activity. The way to stop this generational sin is to live a life of true repentance. May we all strive toward this end.

Third, fake repentance is a threat in bad times and good times (6-7). From 538 to 520 BC, God's people experienced a difficult season.

They had political, social, economic, and religious difficulties, and one of the deceiving words of the snake amid these difficulties is that obeying God is too costly. It is easier to fast than to rebuild the temple. True repentance requires transformation and that is costly. Simply saying a few words or doing a couple of good deeds amid pain is much less costly. So we resort to fake repentance.

Now, before the exile, God's people had experienced less difficult seasons. Zechariah refers to this in verse 7 when he refers to Jerusalem as "inhabited and prosperous" (7). Yet, the former prophets proclaimed the same words as Zechariah (7). You see the snake has a word to those who are at ease, comfortable, and prospering to move us away from repentance to superficial religious activity. The word isn't that obeying is too costly, but that obeying is not necessary. Just look around you the snake says. Look at all of God's blessings. God must truly be pleased with you because of all the blessings he has given to you. Amos, in particular, makes this point. Replacing true repentance with fake repentance is a danger in good times and bad times.

### **True Repentance (7:8-14)**

In verses 4-7, Zechariah identified the people's past fasting as fake repentance. Now, in verses 8-14, Zechariah describes the nature of true repentance. Zechariah describes the same topic – the future for God's people – from different angles. Let's notice several details about this angle. First, true repentance leads to treating others in truly human ways. Verses 9-10 says,

*"Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another, do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart."*

True repentance is summed up in treating others with dignity and love. Now let's compare this activity to their fasting which was an example of false repentance. Their fasting was not a relational activity; treating people as truly human is relational. Their fasting had a start and end time; treating people as truly human doesn't. Their fasting lived in the past; treating people as truly human focuses on the present. Their fasting focused on their sin and its consequences; treating people as truly human focuses on God's grace and its consequences. True religion manifests itself in caring for people, not in religious actions to be checked off a to-do list. Religious activity that flows from true repentance looks like an ongoing expression of love to people because God has graciously loved us. Now to be clear, love doesn't mean we accept or rejoice in the sin of people in our church family or the sin of people outside our community. Love means that as we speak the truth of the gospel, we do so in a manner that magnifies that they are image-bearers of God. We speak the truth in love.

Second, again, Zechariah highlights how a failure to repent is a generational threat (11-14). The Lord stated that the people's ancestors refused to listen, turned a stubborn shoulder, made their ears fat lest they hear, and made their hearts hard lest they hear (11-12). Although the former prophets spoke the word of the Lord to the people, Israel's ancestors refused to listen (12). A failure to repent is generational.

Third, this failure to repent causes pleasantness to be transformed into grief, pain, and suffering (13-14). A terrifying reversal occurs here. Notice verse 13. God calls and the people do not listen; now the people call and God does not listen (13). The thought of God not listening to his people is a horrific image, and this is the result of fake repentance. God closes his ear to those who continually refuse to repent. Notice also how fake repentance doesn't simply move God to passivity in his relationship with his people. It moves him to work actively against the people. Notice verse 14. Here, God is scattering his people like a storm scatters leaves. Fake repentance transforms pleasantness into desolation (14).

### **A History Lesson**

The people come to the prophets and the priests to ask if their current season is a season of grief, pain, and suffering. Should they continue to fast the destruction of their city as they've done for over seventy years (5)? Zechariah speaks on behalf of the group and provides a multifaceted and repetitive answer. First, he identifies their past fasting as fake repentance (4-7). Second, he indicates the people's failure to repent truly.

Now, let's notice something significant here. The people come to Zechariah and ask if they should continue to fast how their sin led to the destruction of their city. Notice what God does. He gives them a history lesson. Most of what Zechariah says refers to their past.

- Verses 5-6 are identified as the words of the former prophets (7)
- Verse 9 is a statement of true repentance but then it is situated in the past in verse 11

- Verses 11-14 all review how a failure to repent from sin in the past led to the grief memorialized in these fasts

Zechariah 7-8 describes for us the transformation of grievous and painful seasons. The people ask if their past marked by their sin and characterized by ongoing pain will march into the future without end, and the answer is amazing. Chapter 7 tells us that in a sense, it should. If our past and present failures wrote our future, then our future would be a continual repeat of the pain of sin, but Zechariah 8 charts a new future. This future is not shaped by our sin, but by God's grace. Because of that, our future is a future of prosperity, not despair. More of that will come next week!

### **Application**

At this point, let's apply Zechariah 7. Replacing true repentance characterized by treating people in truly human ways with religious activities is a constant threat to all generations of God's people, and here is the thing. The religious activity of one generation looks different from the previous generation.

We must model true repentance for God's glory and our children's joy. Our children will not tolerate our religious substitutes, but they'll fall into the same trap. Listen, Satan doesn't care how he traps people; what matters is that he gets people. The how is meaningless. Therefore, let's be people who treat each other with dignity, respect, and love. As verse 9 said, let's be a people concerned about the weak and concerned about justice. Let's never be a people who use our position to indulge ourselves, but let's be a people who ensure that Christ's love spreads to all people in all nations.

There are all kinds of religious trappings. For Zechariah's audience, it was this fast. What is it for you? When some of us sin, we tend to pull away from the church until we clean ourselves up. This is fake religious activity. After sinning, some of us feel like we need to work ourselves back into God's good graces. All of our activity toward this aim is fake religion. Let's be a people who truly repent. When we suffer from our sin and we meditate on important questions of how this sin and its consequences can go away, let's not content ourselves with trite religious phrases or superficial religious activity. Let's trust that Jesus, and Jesus alone, can make the sin go away. Then, let's be moved to true repentance.

As a church, let's constantly ask if there is any activity that we would sin to keep or sin to get. This activity, no matter how good it may seem, is fake religious activity.

Perhaps there is a non-Christian here today. Would you come to Jesus trusting that he died for you and repenting from your sins? Would you confess him as your Lord and follow him today (Romans 10:9). If so, please reach out to us that we might disciple you.

### **Prayer**

God, help us we pray to live lives of true repentance for your glory. We pray these things in Jesus' name, amen.

