

Motives Judged

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[0 : 00] Zechariah 7, the word that gives us hope. In the fourth year of King Darius, the word of the Lord came to Zechariah on the fourth day of the ninth month, the month of Kislev.

The people of Bethel had sent Sherezer and Regem Melech together with their men to entreat the Lord by asking the priests of the house of the Lord Almighty and the prophets, Should I mourn and fast in the fifth month as I have done for so many years?

Then the word of the Lord Almighty came to me. Ask all the people of the land and the priests. When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months for the past 70 years, was it really for me that you fasted?

And when you were eating and drinking, were you not just feasting for yourselves? Are these not the words the Lord proclaimed through the earlier prophets when Jerusalem and its surrounding towns were at rest and prosperous, and the Negev and the western foothills were settled?

And the word of the Lord came again to Zechariah. This is what the Lord Almighty says. Administer true justice. Show mercy and compassion to one another.

[1 : 28] Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor. In your hearts, do not think evil of each other. But they refused to pay attention.

Stubbornly, they turned their backs and stopped up their ears. They made their hearts as hard as flint and would not listen to the law or to the words that the Lord Almighty had sent by his spirit through the earlier prophets.

So the Lord Almighty was very angry. When I called, they did not listen. So when they called, I would not listen, says the Lord Almighty.

I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations where they were strangers. The land was left so desolate behind them that no one could come or go.

So this is how they made the pleasant land desolate. Well, we come to a new section in the book of Zechariah this evening.

[2 : 30] In chapters 1 through 6, what we saw was a series of eight visions. And it was directed primarily to the people of Zechariah's day who were living in the land and they felt stuck.

They felt depressed. They felt sad. The situation, God had called them to build the temple. And yet things had wound down and the temple wasn't built and they were discouraged.

And so there was this series of eight visions in the first six chapters where we saw God getting them moving again. And the way he did it was giving them these great promises of a Savior to come.

And then those promises climaxed and were crowned, so to speak, with this one last symbolic act of Joshua, the high priest, receiving a crown.

And the Lord says to Zechariah, this is a picture of the one who is to come. He's going to be the prophet or the priest and the king. And these two offices are going to be in harmony.

[3 : 41] And we saw that last time we were in the book of Zechariah, that nowhere in Israelite history was a priest ever a king. And so Jesus was going to have a unique standing, a unique status.

He was going to be a king on his throne. He was going to be a priest on his throne. But he was going to present his offering as a king as well. And so there he is to this very day, a king and a priest.

And so as chapter 7 begins, two years have passed and things have changed in Zechariah's day. Now the people aren't stuck anymore and the temple isn't going anywhere.

Right now, I suppose, if we were to travel back in a time machine and we were to be there in Zechariah's day, what we would see was the temple is about halfway finished. So there's stones going up.

Things are happening. There's men building the temple as we speak. And in about two years, the temple is going to be complete. So things have changed.

[4 : 45] They're not stuck anymore. Now they're moving. Things have turned from pessimistic to optimistic. And that is the situation in which this message from the folks in the city of Bethel come to Zechariah, come to the Lord with this question of, should we go on mourning and fasting in the fifth month as we've done for so many years?

Well, before we hear how the Lord answers that, we need to back up just a little bit and say a few things about this question, about how this word connects with our hearts, with you, with me.

What's the connection? How are we similar to the situation as we find it in Zechariah chapter 7? Well, I'll just say this. One of the great blessings of the new covenant is that God puts his spirit into our hearts.

And when he puts the spirit into our hearts, he also places the law into our hearts. And in Jeremiah 33 and other passages about the new covenant, he says, I will put my law in their minds.

I'll put it in their hearts and their minds. And so now it's not, the law isn't something I have a hard time understanding. I don't see why it's right or wrong. I can understand it. It's no longer something I don't want to do.

[6 : 13] Because now my heart is beginning to be shaped by that law. It's engraved on my heart. And so it's now somewhat natural, whereas before it was not natural at all.

It's no longer something contrary to me. Now I want to obey God. I want to love God. I want to be near God.

The spirit of God is a spirit of adoption. And he draws his sons into God's heart. And that's where we want to be. And so we're no longer satisfied with distance.

We're not satisfied with distance between God and me. We're not satisfied with distance or separation between my profession and the reality.

I want the real. Whereas before I was just satisfied with the appearance, the outside. And so that's the sign of true saving faith. New life in Christ is this inward religion.

[7 : 13] A heart concern. A heart love for God. But if we're honest with ourselves, and if I'm honest with myself, then I have to admit and confess that we can still satisfy ourselves.

We can be completely satisfied with outward religion sometimes. The old way of thinking, the old way of relating to God can rear its head.

And then I'm okay with separation. I'm okay with separation between what I say is true and what I'm believing. What I say I believe and how I'm acting. Separation between my outside and my inside.

And that separation, that distance, is what Zechariah chapter 7 is all about. Because God is penetrating the outward performance of what these Israelites were talking about.

And he's reaching for their heart. And so Zechariah 7, in the same way, is searching our hearts. It's the word of God. And as Hebrews says, the word of God is living and active.

[8 : 18] Sharper than any double-edged sword. And it cuts. It penetrates. To the dividing of soul and spirit. Joints and marrow. It judges the thoughts and the attitudes of the heart.

And so this word that Zechariah has for us in Zechariah 7, it goes right past our external religiosity. And it reaches down into our hearts. And then it asks, and it gets out the scales.

And it's judging, not what we do or what we say or what we look like, but it's judging the motives of our hearts. The attitudes of our hearts.

And again, we're reminded that man, we can see the outside. We look on the outside. But God judges the heart. He looks at the heart. And so let's look into Zechariah 7 and realize that this is a word for us.

Well, it begins, like I said, two years after the first six chapters. And today, or chapter 7 begins just sort of like how chapter 1 began, with an exact date of when this word came.

[9 : 25] It was December 7, 518 BC. The word of the Lord came to Zechariah. And you remember some folks from Bethel, which is about 20 miles north of Jerusalem, had come with this religious question.

They wanted to know, should we keep mourning and fasting in the fifth month, as we've done for so many, so many years? And these folks, they have a religious question. They're interested in making sure they're doing their religion right.

And so they're asking, do we need to keep this up? Do we need to keep this up? Or can we back it down a notch? Now, to understand what this question is all about, I do just need to do a little bit of explaining.

Once the exile began, which is about 70, 80 years in the past now, when the exile had began, the people left, and maybe the people who had gone, I'm not sure about that, but the people had begun introducing different fasts into the religious calendar.

And there were times to mourn and to grieve their sin, to remember what God had done, what they had done, where their sin had taken them, everything that had happened.

[10 : 43] Now, verse 3 talks about, in the fifth month, in the fifth month there was a fast, and in the fifth month was a fast to remember, the temple's destruction.

And then there was another fast in the seventh month. Verse 5, I believe, talks about that. Another fast in the seventh month. And it was a fast for the assassination of the governor.

Remember, Nebuchadnezzar had put in a governor, and the people in Judah didn't like him, and so they assassinated him, which caused even more problems.

Chapter 8, the next chapter, mentions two other fasts. The fourth month, they fasted the breaching of the city's walls. And then in the tenth month, they fasted to recall the day Nebuchadnezzar set up his siege around the city.

So you have the idea. All throughout the year, they are remembering what had happened in the destruction of the temple, the destruction of their city, them going into exile.

[11 : 43] They're remembering it. They're mourning it. And for years and years, they had been practicing this outward repentance. And they said to themselves, we lost favor with God, and so if we're going to get back into his good favor, we want the favor of God.

And again and again, they mourned and they fasted. But now that things have begun to change, and things are looking up, the temple once destroyed is on its way up again.

The question is, can we stop fasting now? Can we stop this? Can we just back it off maybe 25%? Are we good, God?

Have we done enough? That's the question. But the thing to see is that this question is revealing something of their hearts.

It's revealing something about their hearts. And maybe you've told one of your kids to go pick up the yard or go play outside, and instead of saying, yes, mom or dad, they come up with a question.

[12 : 51] It's like, how long do we have to stay outside? Or do we have to pick up the backyard too? And you know they're not asking those questions because they're like, oh, mom, I love you.

I want to please you. I want to know what obedience looks like, so please tell me. No, the question is, they don't really want to do it. But they're saying, what's the bare minimum that we have to do in order to make you happy?

How do we do as little as possible to get you off of our back? Well, that's the kind of question this is. The temple's on its way up. Can we stop fasting now?

Have we done enough religious duties here? It's a heart-revealing question. It's not love toward God driving it.

It's self-love. It's self-righteousness. What's the bare minimum that I can do to be good with God, to make Him happy?

[13 : 51] Now, to ask that question of the bare minimum shows you, love never asks for bare minimum, does it? I don't think wives ever want to hear their husbands say, what's the bare minimum I have to do to romance you?

Well, it's a heart-revealing question. And maybe you've asked those questions. Even just to yourself. Do I need to keep doing this? Do I need to keep reading my Bible?

Do I need to keep blank? Is Sunday evening really necessary? Do I have to go to prayer meeting? Do I have to stop watching that show?

Or is it okay? Do I have to give so much? And that's, when we ask ourselves those questions, it's the same thing as what's going on here in Zechariah. Zechariah. We're doing things not out of heart love for God, but because we think they're the right things to do.

We think God will be happy with them if we do it. And God sees right through it. And that's what we see next. And so, so they've asked the question, God sees right through it, and he has four answers for them.

[15 : 01] Four answers to this question. And they're searching answers. And we're just going to take them in order. And the first answer is a question in return.

A lot of times we do that. Someone asks a question, and we ask another question to make the person think. And so God asks that question. And the question is basically, well, who are you doing it for?

Who have you been doing it for? Verse five, was it really for me that you fasted? And then, and verse six, and when you were eating and drinking, were you not just feasting for yourself?

God's answer is simple. What does it matter if you fast in the fifth month or not? You've been doing it for yourself the whole time. If you fast the fifth month, the seventh month, or any other month, you're doing it, you aren't doing it for me, you're doing it for you.

And what does it matter if you fast or you feast? Either one, you're doing it for yourself. And you're fasting, you never reached out to me.

[16 : 17] And you're feasting, you never celebrated me. So what does it matter? You come close to me with your lips, but your heart is far from me.

You come close to me with your body, you come close to me with this, but your heart's far from me. Now, I'm sure there are churches out there today that are full of this sort of thing.

But, brothers and sisters, my concern isn't them. My concern is you, my concern is me. What good does it say, look how bad they are, if I'm doing the very same thing?

Their sin won't excuse mine, and their sin won't hide mine. And so what is real religion? What is fasting that God accepts?

Well, it's a fasting that draws near to God, that is going to God, that is Godward. It's a reflection of Psalm 73. It's an embodied echo.

[17 : 16] And what I mean is, it's something that takes place within your whole body and spirit, and it's echoing what Asaph said in Psalm 73. Whom have I in heaven but you, and there is none on earth that I desire besides you.

It's that desire for God. Fasting puts it into physical action. It's a full body echo of Psalm 43, as the deer pants for the water, so my soul longs for you.

What is it to really fast? Well, as you're fasting, your heart, you're using it to have your heart go out to God and say, God, I need you more than anything else.

I'm like a deer in the desert, and I need you. Well, so were they wrong to fast? No.

Were they doing it for the right reasons? No. They were doing it for themselves, and they weren't doing it in pursuit of God. Well, what about us?

[18 : 12] What about fasting for us? Well, let me just say a few things. And the first, and this is really a way of application. The first is that fasting is expected.

It's expected of all Christians. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, when you give to the needy, now, is giving to the needy just for the super spiritual Christians?

Is it just for the spiritual elite, the abnormal spirituality? No, Jesus expected his disciples to give, so he gave instructions about how their giving is to differ from the giving of the Pharisees.

And then, about two or three paragraphs later, he says, and when you pray, now, I don't think anyone here would say, oh, I shouldn't pray so much.

Praying is super spiritual. No, Jesus expected his disciples to pray, and then he says, and just another couple paragraphs, when you fast, when you fast, not if you fast, but when you fast.

[19 : 24] And so, fasting isn't some sort of Old Testament, or some sort of relic of Old Testament religion, like something that didn't make it into the church, didn't make it into the New Testament.

Jesus expected his people to continue to do it. And we would say, well, fasting is hard. But I'll tell you what, giving is hard. And praying is hard.

It's hard. My flesh doesn't like giving. I don't like working. My flesh doesn't like working and then giving someone else my money. Or praying can be very hard.

And maybe we say, well, I don't understand. I don't understand what I'm supposed to be doing. What am I supposed to be getting out of it? What am I doing this fasting for? I don't understand it. And Zechariah, Zechariah helps us here.

This is one of those passages that opens up this discipline and teaches our hearts what we should be thinking. What should we be feeling? What am I supposed to be? How do I understand it?

[20 : 26] And maybe the point being, asking what I'm supposed to get out of it is probably the wrong question. who are we supposed to do it for?

For God. Fasting's first direction, primary direction, is not towards me. It's not toward my sin.

It's not toward my circumstances. Fasting is not spiritual steroids to make me get big and strong in my spiritual life. Fasting's first direction is to God.

Fasting is giving ourselves to God. It's a way of saying with our body as a voice, as our words, Lord, more than anything, I need you.

And what the hunger pangs of fasting does is it's a reminder. Every hunger pang is supposed to be turned up to God and say, Lord, this is how much I want you.

[21 : 29] This is how much I need you. I need you more than food. So it's God-ward. It has to do with our relationship with God. And if it has to do with our relationship with God, we shouldn't expect something to happen immediately.

Immediate results. Immediate godliness. Because it has to do with our relationship. And a relationship is not a vending machine where you put the coins in and the thing falls down and you get your food and the transaction's over in 60 seconds.

Fasting done right draws us to God. But it's a gradual thing. It's a process. It's a slow thing like any relationship. It shapes and reshapes our hearts so that we're more oriented towards God.

So think of it like this. if you have uneven wear and tear on your tires, what happens over time is your car will pull to the right.

It can pull to the right or pull to the left. But it's not something that happens immediately. It slowly shapes those tires until they're always wanting to veer off to the right.

[22 : 43] That's a good way to think about fasting. Fasting done right bends our hearts gradually and slowly to God. And so instead of going to myself, instead of going to the world, my heart now has this veering.

It wants to veer to God. But fasting done for ourselves, done to satisfy God, to say, oh, I'm a good person, God. Fasting done to make me feel good or anything like that.

It's self-religion. And it's worldly religion. Paul talks about it. He says it has this appearance of wisdom. If you have some sort of sin problem, it would make sense, apparently, to fast.

And that might work. It has this appearance of wisdom. With its self-imposed worship, false humility, and harsh treatment of the body, but it lacks really any value in restraining sensual indulgence.

Because fasting done for me leaves me in the position of power. It leaves me in the position of greatness. I'm still at the center.

[23 : 49] And so it lacks any real value for sensual indulgence. And so fasting selfishly is useless. And so that is the question for them, and that's the question for us.

Who are you doing it for? That's God's first answer. And his second answer is, I've already talked to you about this.

I've already talked to you about this. I've already told you about this whole thing of fasting and religion and inward and outward.

Verse 7 says, the Lord says, and are these not the words the Lord proclaimed through the earlier prophets? Now, what I'm about to tell you and what I've just told you, they're not things that are new.

They're things that I have said before. And so what I'm saying now isn't something new. You didn't need new revelation here. You didn't really need to send someone down to see the priests and the prophets.

[24 : 57] You needed to think about and apply what I've already said. And so you're asking this question only because you haven't really thought about what I've already told you to do.

You're only asking the question because you aren't thinking about what I've said before. And I just picked out one particular Old Testament passage that chronologically would have come before Zechariah's day.

Isaiah 58, day after day they seek me out. They seem eager to know my ways. So there's this appearance of, Lord, we want to know what you want.

Lord, what should we do? They ask me for just decisions and they seem eager for God to come near them. Then he says, why have we fasted, they say, and you have not seen it.

We have humbled ourselves and you have not noticed. So Isaiah is saying, or Israel is saying in Isaiah, we've been doing this fasting thing, right?

[25 : 57] Right? We've been doing what we're supposed to do. We're living up to our end of the deal. Why aren't you living up to your end of the deal? We've humbled ourselves and you haven't noticed. We've been trying to figure out what you want, but it's not done us any good.

And Isaiah says, the Lord says through Isaiah, yet on the day of your fasting you do as you please and you exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife. Is not this the kind of fasting I've chosen?

To loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke? To set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer shelter?

So in Zechariah, God is saying, I've already answered this question if you would have only listened. If you would have only looked and saw and thought. It's no good being religious and doing all the right outward stuff.

Meanwhile, you're doing whatever you want. You say you want to know what I want, but then you don't do what I've already told you to do. So the people in Isaiah's day were saying it.

[27 : 08] People in Zechariah's day are saying it. And people in our day are still doing it. There is a kind of religion religion that is never satisfied with what God has said. They're not satisfied with what he has said.

They want something new. They want something brand new for this day. And the reality is the only reason they're interested in something brand new for this day is because they're not interested in obeying what he's already said today.

It has the appearance of looking like they want to please God, but the whole time it's just showing they don't care what God has already said. But what does real heart religion look like?

Well, first it's God word. And two, in the second place, it's not after something new. It wants to obey what God has already said. Now God's third answer is this.

Religion or ritual and religion is no substitute for godliness. Godliness. Ritual and outward religion is no substitute for godliness. We need to be careful that we don't equate religion and godliness.

[28 : 15] Now, so here we are in verses 8 and 9 in Zechariah chapter 7. And the word of the Lord came again to Zechariah. This is what the Lord Almighty says. Administer true justice.

Show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor. In your hearts do not think evil of each other. Or do not plot evil against one another.

And this is what we've already seen in Isaiah. So he's saying, I've already told you this and now I'll tell you again this is not something new. So does God want fasting without godliness?

Does he want reading your Bible, going to church, going to prayer meeting, putting a fish sign on your car, saying I'm a Christian, homeschooling, whatever, like family worship, whatever the outward religion, does he want that as a substitute for godliness?

For a life pointed towards God, a heart in love with God, and then a life that's imitating God. Religion is no substitute for godliness, it's no substitute for god-likeness.

[29 : 29] God calls us to something higher. He calls us to something higher, more real than just outward religion, he calls us to be like him. And that's what this whole list is in Zechariah chapter 7.

It's how God acts. God is not calling us to something particular, he's calling us to how he acts, and what he does. Jeremiah 9, 24, let him who boasts boast about this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who exercises kindness, justice, and righteousness on the earth, for in these I delight.

Kindness, justice, righteousness, that's what God delights in, that's how he acts, and so Zechariah says, do what God does, and God says, I'm the father of the fatherless, and the protector of widows.

Psalm 146, the Lord watches over the alien, and sustains the fatherless and the widow. That's godliness. That's godlikeness.

So godliness doesn't just get defined by our outward religiosity. Now, it's not to say that you can't be outwardly religious and godly.

[30 : 48] I'm not saying that. But I am saying the one is no substitute for the other. At least that's not all it is.

So who gets put on the widows list in 1 Timothy? Well, there are women over 60 who have been only the ones who are well known for their good deeds.

Good deeds like what? What does it look like to be a godly woman? Well, bringing up children, showing hospitality, washing the feet of the saints.

That's just serving them, helping those in trouble. And so are we doing this? Or do we wear our religion on Sunday or certain times of the day, but the rest of the day I only care for myself and my own and my family, my own desires?

Or are we growing in god-likeness? God-likeness who goes out and he cares about justice. He cares about the orphan and the widow.

[31 : 51] James asks, what is religion that God our Father accepts is pure and faultless? To look after widows and orphans in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

And then in the next chapter James again says, suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food and if one of you says, I wish you well, keep warm and well fed.

In other words, I'll pray for you. Do you see the Bible's point all along?

God's word to Zacharias, folks, and to us, outward religion is no substitute for God-likeness, for a loving concern for those in need, for having eyes open to see those who are in need, and then doing something to help them, to all men, but especially to the family of believers.

One of the saddest things in all of church history is how many white Christians in the South treated black folks in the South, even their fellow believers.

[33 : 08] One very well-known pastor in the South in the 60s, who I think we would agree with a lot of things that he taught and believed, he said, those who oppose segregation oppose God.

And a little later in the very same sermon, he basically said that black folks ought to thank the white people for paying the taxes and bringing them over so they could hear the gospel. As if Joseph should tip his hat to his brothers and say, thank you for selling me into slavery.

And the same man at the same time made up a lot of rules for people to follow. Rules about what you wear, about movies, about smoking, about drinking, and a hundred other things. It was a lot of outward religion.

But when Dr. Martin Luther King said, let justice roll on like a river and righteousness like a never failing stream, a lot of people, a lot of Christians, and he said, no.

And of course, all Martin Luther King was doing was quoting Amos, where God says, I hate your religious feasts. I cannot stand your assemblies, away with the noise of your songs, but let justice roll on like a river and righteousness like a never-ending stream.

[34 : 24] So a whole lot of people had a lot of outward religion, but no justice, no righteousness on the inside, and God says, I hate it. I can't stand it.

And so we need to take that to heart. Ritual is no substitute for godliness. And finally, God says, Ritual won't save you from my wrath.

Religion and ritual will not save you from my wrath. That's God's final answer. Your rituals won't help you when it comes to the day of wrath.

These are the last verses, and we don't have a lot of time. I'm not going to give them a lot of time here. The Israelites in the past, God says, refused to listen. They refused to listen to the earlier prophets about, don't just give me your fasting, don't just give me your religion, give me justice, give me righteousness, show compassion.

They didn't listen. They remained stubborn. They would fast, they would worship, they would have lots of religion, but their religion wouldn't ever go deep enough to affect repentance.

[35 : 31] They never changed their attitude towards sin and towards themselves. They had a lot of ritual, but no righteousness, angry, and he scattered them to the whirlwind of the nations.

The land was barren because of their sin. They wouldn't listen to him. And so when they cried, he didn't listen to them. Ritual won't save you.

That's what Zechariah is saying to those people. And the real question is not fasting. Are you doing your fasting right? The real question is, are you repenting? Where's your heart? Who are you doing this for?

Are you listening to me? The Lord says. And that question comes to me. And it penetrates my life. Penetrates your life.

Do I have love for God? Do I have love for God that translates into love for men? Am I living a godly life?

[36 : 31] Not just a religious life, but a godly life? Lots of people will say, Lord, Lord, didn't I prophesy in your name? I did all sorts of things in your name.

I was in front of everyone in your name. And the son of man will say, away from me, I never knew you. You and I, we never had a heart-to-heart.

You and I, we never got that close. I don't know you. In Lubeck, Germany, it's on the north sea, on the coast, Lubeck, Germany, there's a cathedral, an old medieval cathedral, and inscribed in Latin, there's a poem on one of the doors, and it says this, you call Honor me not.

You call me just and fear me not. If I condemn you, blame me not. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, far be it from any of us to show up on that day dressed in robes of religion, dressed in all of our good deeds and yet naked without the righteousness of Jesus Christ, without the heart of the matter in us.

[38 : 26] Please keep each and every one of us from that. Open our eyes to see that you are not playing and trifling.

We are not playing dress up with you. You want what is real. You want our hearts and you want our love and you want our lives that look like yours.

And we have fallen far short. We thank you that Jesus Christ has come to save sinners. And so we give ourselves to him, but we ask that you would help us to live more like him.

Please save. Please convict. Please encourage. Please help us to live godly lives in this crooked and perverse generation.

Help us to do that by your spirit. We thank you that your grace will keep us to that day. And so we give ourselves to you. We ask that you would make your face to shine upon us and do us good.

[39 : 27] We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.