

True Religion

The Introduction to Zechariah's Burdens

- ¹ In the **fourth year of King Darius**, the **word of the LORD** came to Zechariah on the fourth day of the ninth month, which is **Chislev**.
- ² Now the people of **Bethel** had sent **Sharezer** and **Regem-melech** and their men to entreat the favor of the LORD,
- ³ saying to the priests of the house of the LORD of hosts and the prophets, "Should I weep and abstain in the fifth month, as I have done for so many years?"
- ⁴ Then **the word of the LORD of hosts came to me** [saying]:
- ⁵ "Say to all the people of the land and the priests, When you fasted and mourned in the fifth month and in the seventh, for these seventy years, was it for me that you fasted?
- ⁶ And when you eat and when you drink, do you not **eat for yourselves and drink for yourselves**?
- ⁷ Were not these the words that the LORD proclaimed by the former prophets, when Jerusalem was inhabited and prosperous, with her cities around her, and the South and the lowland were inhabited?"
- ⁸ And **the word of the LORD came to Zechariah, saying**,
- ⁹ "Thus says the LORD of hosts, Render **true judgments**, **show kindness** and **mercy** to one another,
- ¹⁰ **do not oppress** the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart."

- 11 But they refused to pay attention and turned a stubborn shoulder and stopped their ears that they might not hear.
- 12 They made their hearts **diamond-hard** lest they should hear the law and the words that the LORD of hosts had sent **by his Spirit** through the former prophets. Therefore great anger came from the LORD of hosts.
- 13 "As I called, and they would not hear, so they called, and I would not hear," says the LORD of hosts,
- 14 "and I scattered them with a **whirlwind** among all the nations that they had not known. Thus the land they left was desolate, so that no one went to and fro, and the pleasant land was made desolate."

ESV **Zechariah 8:1** And **the word of the LORD of hosts came, saying,**

2 "Thus says the LORD of hosts: I am **jealous** for Zion with great jealousy, and I am jealous for her with great **wrath**.

3 Thus says the LORD: I have returned to Zion and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem, and Jerusalem shall be called the faithful **city**, and the **mountain** of the LORD of hosts, the holy **mountain**.

4 **Thus says the LORD of hosts:** Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of great age.

5 And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets.

6 **Thus says the LORD of hosts:** If it is marvelous in the sight of the remnant of this people in those days, should it also be marvelous in my sight, declares the LORD of hosts?

7 **Thus says the LORD of hosts:** Behold, I will save my people from the east country and from the west country,

8 and I will bring them to dwell in the midst of Jerusalem. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God, in faithfulness and in righteousness."

- ⁹ Thus says the LORD of hosts: "Let your hands be strong, you who in these days have been hearing these words from the mouth of the prophets who were present on the day that the foundation of the house of the LORD of hosts was laid, that the temple might be built.
- ¹⁰ For before those days there was no wage for man or any wage for beast, neither was there any safety from the foe for him who went out or came in, for I set every man against his neighbor.
- ¹¹ But now I will not deal with the remnant of this people as in the former days, declares the LORD of hosts.
- ¹² For there shall be a sowing of peace. The vine shall give its fruit, and the ground shall give its produce, and the heavens shall give their dew. And I will cause the remnant of this people to possess all these things.
- ¹³ And as you have been a byword of cursing among the nations, O house of Judah and house of Israel, so will I save you, and you shall be a blessing. Fear not, but let your hands be strong."
- ¹⁴ For thus says the LORD of hosts: "As I purposed to bring disaster to you when your fathers provoked me to wrath, and I did not relent, says the LORD of hosts,
- ¹⁵ so again have I purposed in these days to bring good to Jerusalem and to the house of Judah; fear not.
- ¹⁶ These are the things that you shall do: Speak the truth to one another; render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace;
- ¹⁷ do not devise evil in your hearts against one another, and love no false oath, for all these things I hate, declares the LORD."
- ¹⁸ And the word of the LORD of hosts came to me, saying,
- ¹⁹ "Thus says the LORD of hosts: The fast of the fourth month and the fast of the fifth and the fast of the seventh and the fast of the

tenth shall be to the house of Judah seasons of joy and gladness and cheerful feasts. Therefore love truth and peace.

²⁰ "Thus says the LORD of hosts: Peoples shall yet come, even the inhabitants of many cities.

²¹ The inhabitants of one city shall go to another, saying, 'Let us go at once to entreat the favor of the LORD and to seek the LORD of hosts; I myself am going.'

²² Many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the LORD of hosts in Jerusalem and to entreat the favor of the LORD.

²³ Thus says the LORD of hosts: In those days ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying, 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.'"

Zechariah 7:1:8-23

Going to Extremes

RELIGION HAS THIS fascinating and frustrating tendency to move people from extreme to extreme. On the one hand, religion is external and ritualistic. In its best form, this is obeying the Ten Commandments: loving *God* and loving your *neighbor* as yourself. In its worst form, it becomes rote, meaningless, spiritual gymnastics and hoops to jump through in a crass form of works-based religion. On the other hand, there is internal, spontaneous, heart religion. In

its best form, this is trusting God by faith alone. In its worst form, it is self-absorbed, fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants spirituality, where you get to decide what is good and true, worship is whoever and wherever you want, and anything goes as long as you are sincere.

Humans seem to gravitate to one of these two poles. They always seem to exist side by side. Sometimes, maybe all the time, they even exist in the same person together. In their darker forms, these two impulses might be called [legalism](#) on one hand, and [antinomianism](#) on the other.

Legalism is fixated on external appearances. The focus is on doing the “right” thing or even knowing and believing the “right” thing. Sometimes these things are good and biblical laws and doctrines, but the heart is far away. The thing becomes an end to itself. Other times, legalists will focus on secondary issues, third-level issues, sometimes even non-biblical issues altogether. Almost always, the legalist is zealous to a fault about these things. Rarely would he claim that his own heart isn’t in it. I mean, just look at how serious he is about it! What great zeal the legalist has. Sometimes he demands that he himself

perform or believe the thing. Often times his only real concern is that you do.

Antinomianism (it literally means “against law”) is fixated on making sure that you know that he doesn’t care about external appearances or orthodox doctrine. The focus is often on the heart, sincerity, and emotional feelings. But they want to make sure that you know that they are not bound to traditions, rituals, formats, law-keeping, and other such things. For the antinomian, not doing or believing seems to be a badge of honor.

My theory is that we all have both impulses inside of us simultaneously. We each have our own hobby horses that we believe everyone else must believe or else. We each have our own outrage over one thing, while another equally or perhaps even worse thing doesn’t seem to bother us in the slightest. This hypocrisy helps us justify ourselves as we puff ourselves up in self-righteousness. This is the fallen condition of remaining sin and the flesh that still lives within us. In our passage today, the prophet Zechariah, without using these words, is nevertheless

focused on these ideas. He wants to make sure we get the point.

He began his book with an **introduction** to seven night visions. That introduction was brief, but it cut like a sharp sword through sin and hypocrisy. In the eighth month of the second year of king Darius, the Word of the LORD came to Zechariah saying, “**The LORD was very angry with your fathers**” (**Zech 1:1-2**). Yahweh’s anger against sin is the focus of this introduction. What were they doing? He simply says they were committing “**evil ways**” and “**evil deeds**” while not hearing or paying attention to the LORD’s law and prophets (**4**). Sin against God, then ignore the God you sin against. That was the way of it.

So he further explains that there finally came a generation of Israelites that God severely **punished**. They died in a foreign land, without a temple, without God’s presence, without peace, in a broken covenant and relationship, based on the terms of that covenant. **Their fathers died** (**5**). The **curses overtook them** (**6**). It was exactly as it had been predicted, though they ignored the LORD every time he spoke to them.

It isn't all doom and gloom in this introduction, however. For Yahweh of hosts extended his hand in friendship to his enemies—his chosen people. “Return to me and I will return to you,” he said (3). “Returning” is the idea of repentance. Turning away from their sins and back towards the God they had forsaken. As demonstration of this, he tells them that the generation that went into exile was broken. “They repented,” because the heavy hand of God in judgment over them was simply too much for them to bear (6).

This introduction basically fades into the background for the next six chapters as the seven night visions unfold. But then those visions come to an end and we reach the center focus of the book, which teaches us about a coming Messiah who will become the Priest-King of a world-wide kingdom who will build a new temple made up of living stones—people that he has chosen to make up his church.

But this is only the middle of the book, thematically speaking. There is much more that Zechariah has to say. He will change the form of communication, moving from strange and bizarre visions that are hard to interpret, to

two “burdens” which parallel the night visions in amazing ways. These burdens are like a deep longing in the soul of the prophet, like a fire in his belly that heats up if he refuses to speak it out, like a heavy load that he must put down lest he fall to the ground unable to move anymore.

Like the visions, the prophet has an **introduction** to the two burdens. But unlike the first introduction, this one takes up two full chapters, 37 verses. **Zechariah 7-8 is a single literary unit**, like I said, an introduction to the burdens. So it deserves to be preached all at once. It consists of a **short question** in the form of an inquiry to the LORD (**Zech 7:1-3**), and a very **long answer** by the Word of the LORD (**7:4-8:23**). The Word’s answer can be broken up into four sections, each of which begin “...the Word of the LORD ... came ... saying” (**7:4, 8; 8:1, 18**, see also **7:1**). One Bible Commentary put them into four messages of: **rebuke, repentance, restoration, and rejoicing**.

A. The messages required by the question about fasting
(**7:1-3**)

- B. The messages declared as the answer from the Lord (7:4-8:23)
1. A message of rebuke (7:4-7)
 2. A message of repentance (7:8-14)
 3. A message of restoration (8:1-17)
 4. A message of rejoicing (8:18-23).¹

Another divides it up simply by chapters. Chapter 7 is about “ritual or reality.” Chapter 8 is about “The promise of the future.”² As I read over this the first time this week, I was immediately struck by how Chapter 7 felt like very bad news, but Chapter 8 was very good news. Therefore, in a general way, we have law-gospel. The flavor of these two chapters tastes very much like the introduction to the night visions, only much longer. Zechariah loves to repeat himself, because he knows the repetition is the best way to learn a thing. I said repetition is the best way to learn a thing.

¹ F. Duane Lindsey, “Zechariah,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 1547. <http://www.theholyscriptures.org/alfredbouter/library/documents/do989.pdf>

² Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 1752.

Should We Stop?

Both introductions begin with a date. The first was the eighth month of the second year of king Darius (**Zech 1:1**). This one begins, “**In the fourth year of King Darius ... on the fourth day of the ninth month, which is Chislev.**” So we are now two years and a month removed from the night visions. It is December 7, 518 B.C., exactly 2,459 years before Pearl Harbor, which is probably completely meaningless, but might help you remember when it takes place. This puts it near the **midpoint of the initial breaking ground** of the new temple (**Hag 2:10–23**) and its **completion** (**Ezra 6:14**). Ralph Smith notices that “**Evidently sacrifices were being offered and worship was conducted.**”³

Solomon’s temple was destroyed in 587 B.C. So we are now 69 years into the exile which was symbolically to last for **seventy years** according to Jeremiah (**25:11-12**) and Daniel (**9:2**).⁴ Thus, when we come to **Zech 7:2** and read

³ **Ralph L. Smith**, *Micah–Malachi*, vol. 32, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 222.

⁴ Literalists won’t like that I said this is a symbolic number, but this is made clear in Zechariah 1:12, where the prophet asks why God has been angry “these seventy years?” But that was said

about a delegation of men lead by Sharezer and Regem-melech from Bethel, we can begin to understand what they are coming to Jerusalem to do. It says that they came “to entreat the favor of the LORD, saying to the priests of the house [temple] of the LORD of hosts and the prophets, ‘Should I weep and abstain in the fifth month, as I have done for so many years?’” (7:2-3).

What they are doing is asking the prophets (whom the Word of the LORD came directly to) and priests (who had the Urim and Thummim) to inquire of God and find out if the exile is finally over. But the way the verses tell us this is important. Rather than ask it bluntly like that, it tells us that this was a delegation from Bethel. Bethel was one of two religious centers of worship set up by king Jeroboam that was to operate as a kind of replacement city for Jerusalem in a divided kingdom. Rather than obey God and continue to worship where he had put his Name and where he sat on his throne in Jerusalem, Jeroboam the Pragmatist insisted that where you worship God doesn't

two years earlier than our text today, making it literally only 67 years. Zech 7:5 does the same thing in our passage.

matter. Bethel was the southernmost city of his kingdom (Dan was the northernmost). So the fact that now, after God had punished them, men from *this* city in a once divided kingdom come down to Jerusalem is a very good sign.

We don't know much about **Sharezer** and **Regem-melech**. The names do not appear to be symbolic, at least not to me. Sharezer means “**He beheld treasure. Protect or preserve the king; (God) protect the king. Prince of fire. Splendor of brightness.**” Regem-melech might mean “**Friend of the king**” or “**Stoning of the king.**”⁵ What is more important is that they were obviously **leaders** of men who were leading the people in **prescribed religious fasting and mourning**, according to the Law. They did this because of the exile. They had been doing it on certain days for these past seventy years. Now they are wondering, has the time for fasting come to an end? Will their weeping finally turn into rejoicing?

⁵ Stelman Smith and Judson Cornwall, *The Exhaustive Dictionary of Bible Names* (North Brunswick, NJ: Bridge-Logos, 1998), 215, 203.

I don't think that people in our nation can truly emotionally bond with this kind of inquiry, at least not yet. To have everything you know taken away from you. To have family murdered, houses burned, friends sent off to Babylon. To have to learn a foreign language, strange customs, new work, and to be told to persevere through all of this by the prophets because it was God's doing, who can imagine such horror? So their inquiry is very understandable, if not also heartbreaking.

That is the first of the two sections of our passage—the short question. Now comes the answer. God graciously gave them an answer, though the first part of it might not seem very gracious. But God, as usual, does not simply give a yes or no answer. He takes the opportunity to teach the people. He does this through Christ—the Word of the LORD of hosts, who comes speaking (4). He does this through Zechariah (4), God's prophet and mouthpiece who speaks on his behalf to the people, lest they die.

A Message of Rebuke

[Zech 7:4-7](#) is the first of four speeches by the Word. Its answer to their question must have taken the

delegation aback. “Say to all the people of the land and the priests, When you fasted and mourned in the fifth month and in the seventh, for these seventy years, was it for me that you fasted?” (5). The Word of the LORD also has eyes. And the eyes of the LORD are everywhere, ranging through the whole earth (Zech 4:10; Rev 5:6). These eyes of the LORD are omnipotent, and are not fooled by outward appearances. *Mere* external religion is an abomination to the LORD of hosts.

Curiously, the Word wonders out loud if, when they fasted, they gave any thought whatsoever ... to him! “Was it for me that you fasted?” It is such a strage thing that it makes me wonder if it wasn’t in Jesus mind when the Pharisees came to Jesus and said, “The disciples of John fast often and offer prayers, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours eat and drink.’ And Jesus said to them, ‘Can you make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days’” (Luke 5:33-35).

In Zechariah, the Word is also speaking on behalf of the Father who is also the LORD of hosts. So, did the people of that day give any thought to him either when they fasted? And knowing that the LORD of hosts has a Spirit who knows all things and fills the temple with his glory, did they care in any way about him? Was it for me that you fasted? Are you fasting for God's sake, or your own? This question gets at the heart of mere external religion.

“And when you eat and when you drink, do you not eat for yourselves and drink for yourselves?” (6). The Word has come to awaken the people not from their weeping, but from their spiritual slumber, so that they will be aware that God does not change, even if he is returning in grace. For the daily religious habits of fasting and then eating, of abstaining and then drinking can become ends to themselves. It makes people feel spiritual, and in return, self-righteous. Look at how religious we are! And indeed, when it is an end to itself, it is only done for oneself. Calvin says,

“God regards not fastings, except they proceed from a sincere feeling and tend to a right and lawful end.” It was then the object of the Prophet to awaken the Jews, that they might not imagine that God was pacified by fasting or by any other frigid ceremonies, but that they might know that something more was required. And we see how prone mankind are to rely on external rites, and to think that they have rightly performed their duty to God when they have fasted. As then human nature labours under this disease, the Prophet is here sent to dissipate this delusion; which he does by declaring that fasting does not please God, or is acceptable to him, as though it were something meritorious, or as though there was in it any holiness.”⁶

We could say the same about any act or belief. Going to church (commanded), putting your kids in Sunday School (not commanded), doing a liturgy, taking the Supper, singing songs, going through the motions, telling people how important the Sabbath is, writing huge tomes on tiny

⁶ John Calvin and John Owen, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, vol. 5 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 172–173.

phrases of religious doctrine, being proud about how “Reformed” you are (in our circles)... none of that matters to God in and of itself. It doesn’t matter.

To prove it, Zechariah calls upon the former prophets. “Were not these the words that the LORD proclaimed by the former prophets, when Jerusalem was inhabited and prosperous, with her cities around her, and the South and the lowland were inhabited?” (7). The place that comes to my mind as an example is Isaiah 58, which is about fastings and the Sabbath. Isaiah prophesied prior to the exile.

Isaiah says that they sought the LORD daily in public ways, boasting in their fasting, telling everyone how much they delight to be near to God (Isa 58:3). Yet, they couldn’t understand why God would not see their fasting and their show of public humility and repentance (3). God tells them it is because as they did those things, they simultaneously sinned in other ways. Their fasting was for “their own pleasure,” which meant “oppressing all the workers” (3), quarreling and fighting and hitting one another (4). He says the exact same thing about the Sabbath, using the exact same phrasing, “doing your

pleasure on my holy day” and calling it a “delight” (13), which in the context of the chapter was about doing wicked things to one another, just like they did fasting. God is exposing the deep religious hypocrisy of those who think God cares only about outward things, and only certain outward things at that. What do I mean?

A Message of Repentance

The Word of the LORD comes again to Zechariah a second time (8) saying, “Thus says the LORD of hosts, 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” (9-10). Here then is a list of the many things they should care about doing, but don’t. Oh, they will fast. That’s easy ... compared to obeying the law of God with respect to their neighbors who are the least of all.

He calls upon the Law of Moses, which deals many times with these peoples. The NT takes these things, not fastings and religious days, as the more important principles. Our Lord’s half-brother James said, “Religion

that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world” (James 2:1). I have been struck on more than one occasion at how much Christian Pietism is focused on inward sins (hate, lust, envy), but how little we actually do outwardly for the poor, the widow, the orphan. Yet, the Bible is overwhelmingly concerned about the outward acts of kindness towards people who need it. True religion is about other people, not helping yourself reach some ascended spiritual master rank like a Buddhist.

Yet, we turn around and often say, “Well, that’s what Liberals and Catholics do,” as if it makes those bad things that we don’t have to do too. I’m not sure what to make of this, but a pastor friend of mine was struck this week at how few of his Reformed Baptist pastor friends have been saying anything at all about the abortion issue right now, while every post they make is about some doctrine that must be believed or else. Why is this?

Perhaps we have things backwards and need to listen to our Lord in the NT when he tells the Pharisees, “But woe

to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and the love of God. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others” (Luke 11:42). He doesn’t say, “Give up the former things and only do the latter things.” He says do both. Maybe we need to learn from Micah again, “He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8). It seems pretty clear that Zechariah is thinking about this verse. Perhaps we need to hear the words of Solomon again, “The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man” (Ecc 12:13).

But you say, “I can’t do all that!” You’re right. So what. God still requires that you do. But you say, “Because I can’t do it, God won’t hold me [or us] accountable.” No, isn’t true that you can’t do it, it is true that you don’t *want* to do it. The problem is your will, not your body. But you say, “We are not under law, but under grace.” That doesn’t mean we sin on purpose. Rather, it means that God gives us new affections to love our neighbor, the orphan, the

widow, the unborn, the extremely old, the alien living in your midst. Christ did these things and you have been given the mind of Christ.

We love to go to extremes. Some move from doing one outward thing to a different one. But the Scripture never says don't fast, don't worry about the fourth commandment, who cares about public liturgy, all that matters is the heart. No, it tells us that *it all matters*. But frankly, if there is no heart religion in an external matter, then it *doesn't* matter. And if we minimize the true religion of James by finding ways in our minds to justify not carrying out those things, then our religion is worthless.

How do you get people to understand that it all matters, not just one thing or the other? And how do you tell people that the Bible really does have priorities in such matters? It is very difficult, because our natural tendency is not to obey *Zech 7:9-10*, but to fall into the same trap as *11-12*. “They refused to pay attention and turned a stubborn shoulder and stopped their ears that they might not hear. They made their hearts diamond-hard lest they should hear the law and the words that the LORD of hosts

had sent by his Spirit through the former prophets.” This is what the Word of the LORD of hosts who carries out justice on earth is telling this delegation now. Do not be like your fathers. Yet, I know that you are like your fathers. But you don’t *think* you are like your fathers. Yet, that is exactly the kind of thing that your fathers thought about their fathers who made me so angry in the desert. Where was their faith? Did they do it for me? Do you? No, instead, they put me to the test (1 Cor 10:9).

The only thing that seemed to work, the way God finally got his point across after years and years of telling them and seeing that it only hardened them, was the end of vs 12. “Therefore great anger came from the LORD of hosts. ‘As I called, and they would not hear, so they called, and I would not hear,’ says the LORD of hosts, and I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations that they had not known. Thus the land they left was desolate, so that no one went to and fro, and the pleasant land was made desolate” (12-14). The whirlwind is related to the Spirit-wind who sent the prophets. As the Spirit warned them, so also the Spirit judged them. This was the Day of

God's wrath, a foreshadowing of what is coming upon the whole world.

Such an extreme measure got their attention. Yet, even then, the tendency was to trust in forms and laws, in mere obedience to get them out of their bind. It is like a child thinking that if they say they are sorry, that's all that matters, they don't have to actually mean it. I say that having just said that God demands that we obey him. But the problem is, our own hypocrisy causes us to start picking and choosing what we think is important and what we don't think is important. And that in turn effects how we treat others and what we tell them they must. The farther down we go in this sin, the crazier it seems to get, so that everyone around us sees the hypocrisy, while we insulate ourselves thinking we are the epitome of righteousness on earth.

A Message of Restoration

The solution to this is not found in Zechariah 7. Some will think that it is. “OK, so I'll just obey better.” Yes, you need to do that, but it isn't the solution to the problem that the Word is raising to the delegation from Bethel. The

solution is only found in Chapter 8. The solution does not reside primarily in you, but in understanding and knowing the grace *of God*. He is the solution, not you. Curiously, for these people, the solution was still in their own future. For us, it is only partly so.

The third time the Word comes saying something begins in 8:1. “Thus says the LORD of hosts: I am jealous for Zion with great jealousy, and I am jealous for her with great wrath” (2). You see, the LORD had chosen Mt. Zion to be the place of his dwelling on earth. He had chosen the seed of Abraham to be his treasured possession. This choice was not based on works, but on him who calls. Even though the nation was placed under a works-type covenant with Moses, their election was still rooted in grace. Though he punished the nation for rebellion, he never forgot his choice-possession. He never forgot his people, especially the “remnant” (see Zech 8:6).

Thus, the seventy years of exile, which could have justly been many more, was an act of grace. God’s wrath here is not towards his people, but against those who seek to harm them. His jealousy for his wife (even though he

had officially divorced her), had caused him once more to return to home. The delegation that stands before the prophet now is standing in the middle of a temple that is being restored, with worship that is being restored, because God has promised to bless them again and to be among them for peace. “Thus says the LORD: I have returned to Zion and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem, and Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city, and the mountain of the LORD of hosts, the holy mountain” (3).

Previously, we saw God says, “Return to me and I will return to you.” Yet we have just seen that in fact, they have not completely returned to him, and never can. Therefore, he has returned to them! The news is too good to be true, yet it is. He is doing this because he is jealous for them. He will win them back. He will win them back by being their God, by returning to them, by dwelling among them. But beloved, the LORD here is only using the present circumstances typologically. For this entire chapter looks forward to something that was not yet there even in the rebuilding of the temple.

The Word now says **five things** that come from the LORD of hosts. Each begins, “**thus says the LORD of hosts**” (**8:4, 6, 7, 9, 14**). First, “**Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of great age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in the streets**” (**4-5**). He is using physical age and having children to refer to a coming glorious future, the way Isaiah and others did when they talked about young men dying at 100 years of age (**Isa 65:20**). What is coming in the future is glorious peace and health. In some sense, this future is still future to us.

Second, the LORD of hosts talks about the remnant. “**If it is marvelous in the sight of the remnant of this people in those days, should it also be marvelous in my sight, declares the LORD of hosts?**” (**Zech 8:6**). The remnant was literally **a small group of people** who returned from Babylon to Israel. But it became a way the prophets would talk about the coming Messianic age. This is made clear by Zechariah by the language “**in those days.**” This refers to the Messianic future, not merely the second temple future. This part is already coming true today. This whole chapter

speaks of the coming necessity of Christ to bring this full return of God.

Paul, quoting prophets like Hosea takes the “remnant” language to refer to the elect, especially among the Gentiles (see **Romans 9**). This leads us to the third thing the LORD of hosts says: “Behold, I will save my people from the east country and from the west country, and I will bring them to dwell in the midst of Jerusalem. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God, in faithfulness and in righteousness” (7-8). Again, the immediate fulfillment of this is the exiles returning from Babylon. But the exiles were *already returning* and this prophecy is about their future. What “west” country is there from Israel that they had been deported to? There isn’t one. It refers to the engrafting in of the Gentiles from places like Greece, Italy, Spain, Britain, and beyond. And this is what God is doing even today. You are fortunate enough to be living in the fulfillment of these things, to have been invited and called to participate in them.

The Jerusalem he refers to is, again, in the immediate context, **earthly Jerusalem** with the second temple. But in

Messianic terms, it is **Jerusalem that is above**. Heavenly Jerusalem, coming down out of the clouds, to be God's city over the whole earth. It is the city of the kingdom of Christ. This is how the NT repeatedly talks about the remnant and God's people now.

Fourth, the LORD of hosts says, “**let your hands be strong, you who in these days have been hearing these words from the mouth of the prophets who were present on the day that foundation of the house of the LORD of hosts was laid, that the temple might be built**” (9). He is speaking now directly to Sharezer, Regem-melech and their men. Be strong because you know that you have indeed heard from the LORD. He tells them to remember their recent past. “**For before those days there was no wage for man or any wage for beast, neither was there any safety from the foe for him who went out or came in, for I set every man against his neighbor**” (10). This was the wrath and judgment of God against them for breaking covenant.

But then he tells them to look forward in faith to the future. It is all about faith. Faith in the answer. Faith in the promises of God. Faith in Christ himself. “**But now I will**

not deal with the remnant of this people as in the former days, declares the LORD of hosts” (11). It isn’t because of them, but because of himself. This is classic language of the new covenant made by the likes of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. The new covenant is made with Christ the Sinless God-man.

Therefore, “There shall be a sowing of peace. The vine shall give its fruit, and the ground shall give its produce, and the heavens shall give their dew” (all very earthy, tangible metaphors that people living in such desolation would appreciate). “And I will cause the remnant of this people to possess all these things” (12). The Apostle says, “So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace” (Rom 11:5-6). Do you see the good news in Zechariah now? The whole tone is very different from the previous chapter. For this is all about God’s work.

“You have been a byword of cursing among the nations, O house of Judah and house of Israel” (he speaks of the divided kingdom now as one), “so will I save you, and

you shall be a blessing. Fear not, but let your hands be strong” (13). Do the work you are doing and look forward by faith to these promises.

Finally, the LORD of hosts says, “As I purposed to bring disaster to you when your fathers provoked me to wrath, and I did not relent, says the LORD of hosts, so again have I purposed in these days to bring good to Jerusalem and to the house of Judah; fear not. These are the things that you shall do: speak the truth to one another; render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace; do not devise evil in your hearts against one another, and love no false oath, for all these things I hate, declares the LORD” (14-17). Notice now that because of the good news that comes unconditionally to them, while they are yet sinners, because of the good news, obey the law. The law no longer stands as a threat to them, but as that which they want to keep out of gratitude. It isn’t just the NT church is to have this posture towards God’s law. Jews were too. All along.

A Message of Rejoicing

It is in this context then, of joyful obedience, knowing you fail, knowing God has promised a glorious future through Messiah, knowing that he has kept the covenant, knowing that he gives grace, knowing that he returns to us, knowing that he came to us when we were his enemies, knowing that it is all about him, it is in this context that the final “Word of the LORD of hosts” comes now to Zechariah saying three things. Again they each begin with “thus says the LORD of hosts” (8:19, 20, 23).

First, “The fast of the fourth month and the fast of the fifth and the fast of the seventh and the fast of the tenth” (all proscribed fasts for the people) “shall be to the house of Judah seasons of joy and gladness and cheerful feasts. Therefore love truth and peace” (19). Two things are worth pointing out. Fasting is where you don’t eat. Feasting is when you do. Their fasts will become feasts. Sounds like the passage in the Gospels (above) again. When Jesus was with the disciples, he did not let them fast. The time for fasting will come when the bridegroom leaves, he said (Mark 9:15). He is the fulfillment of the joy that began

in Zechariah's day. Second, notice that it isn't "Therefore love truth, and peace doesn't matter, because all that matters is truth." Nor does it say, "Wear peace tie-dye shirts, and everyone believe what he wants." Truth. And peace. Both. Equally important. This is no time to go back to the extremes of false religion.

Second, the LORD of hosts says, "Peoples shall yet come, even the inhabitants of many cities. The inhabitants of one city shall go to another, saying, 'Let us go at once to entreat the favor of the LORD and to seek the LORD of hosts; I myself am going'" (Zech 8:20-21). This is the language used at the beginning of this introduction and thus takes us (and the delegation), full circle. But who are these peoples? Only from other cities in Israel? No. "Many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the LORD of hosts in Jerusalem and to entreat the favor of the LORD" (22). It is as we have been saying. This is a prophecy about the church.

Finally, the LORD of hosts says, "In those days ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying, 'Let us go with you, for we have

heard that God is with you’” (23). “Behold, a woman who had suffered from a discharge of blood for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his garment, for she said to herself, ‘If I only touch his garment, I will be made well’” (Matt 9:20-21). She literally touched the robe of a Jew who was literally Emmanuel: God with us.

True Religion

Friends, true religion is actually **very difficult** to practice. True religion demands that you care about external things. You must care about doing the right things, the things that are in God’s word. But you must *also* care equally about when you fail to do the right things. You must also be desirous and of seeking repentance, of wanting God not to leave you to your sins, of wanting to be purged and made more like Christ. You also must learn that there are things that God sees as more important than other things. Truth. And Peace. Believing Right. Doing Right. And Loving. Being Kind. Helping others. Being patient. Caring for the helpless. Worshiping the LORD. It is all part of true religion. If you seek to make yourself or

others conform to this, then woe is you, for you are still in Zechariah 7.

But true religion is also, actually, **very easy** to practice. For true religion does these things, but only *after giving them all up* and trusting in Christ by faith alone. The Gospel is about God, not you. The good news is that God doesn't forsake us, though we forsake him. The good news is that he has a chosen people and he will not lose them. It is that he has a plan and will not fail. It is that his Son has obeyed where you have fallen. You must look to him for your righteousness, and not yourself. You must encourage others look to his being right, not themselves. Those who do will find themselves being transformed from glory to glory, to better obedience, better thinking, better behavior because they have been grafted into the Branch, the LORD our Righteousness, in whom nothing evil dwells.