

The visions and prophecies that encouraged the construction on the temple to continue had done their work (Haggai 1:13-14ⁱ). The predictions of the Branch that was to come had inspired the people to move forward (Zechariah 6:12-13ⁱⁱ). Now the remnant was wondering how the rebuilt temple would affect the way they worshiped. A whole generation had known of nothing but fasting and mourning for the loss of the temple.

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?" Zechariah 7:1-3 After the fall of Jerusalem, the Jews had four times of fasting during each year to mourn the destruction of Jerusalem. The fast they were referring to was one of those fasts. (Verse five tells us they fasted in the fifth and seventh months and 8:19 tells us of fasts in the fourth and tenth months.) The fasts reminded them of their sins that brought about that destruction. So now that the temple was being rebuilt the people of the city of Bethel sent men to ask if they should still observe the upcoming fast. Was it right to mourn when God was turning things around and was restoring what had been lost? Had God's favor returned? And if it wasn't right to fast at this time, then they would expect the other three fasts were no longer needed as well. The people of Bethel expected the priests and prophets to make a teaching/torah on the matter.

I would compare it today to the church question of whether we should mourn when we take communion or rejoice. After all, Jesus already paid the price for my sins. Maybe we should rejoice instead that our sins have been blotted out. Let's ask a theologian or a renowned preacher. What is the right response?

⁴ Then the word of the LORD of hosts came to me: 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?" Zechariah 7:4-7 The answer was given to Zechariah in four parts, two in this chapter and two in the next. He was to tell the people and priests the word from the Lord. God asked them a question. When they fasted during the seventy years of captivity, was it for the Lord? When they celebrated the feasts before captivity was it for the Lord? God's questions are like a blinding light that exposes every hidden thing (Genesis 3:11ⁱⁱⁱ). The author of Hebrews wrote, *¹³ And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.* Hebrews 4:13 The very thoughts and intentions of our hearts are exposed. The issue is the heart of the worshiper. To answer the question, we must examine our own hearts and minds. What was I thinking? What was my motivation? What am I thinking of when I take communion or when singing worship songs?

This does not only apply to repentance and mourning, but also to celebration and thanksgiving. What is going on inside? Am I celebrating God's grace and goodness and rejoicing in His grace and mercy? Or am I just thinking of my desires and glad I'm not in need? Is my mind wandering? In other words, am I considering the LORD or just my physical prosperity? Am I just going through the motion of religious ritual hoping to obtain my desires while neglecting a real relationship with God?

Isaiah addressed the issue of fasting that was self-centered rather than God centered in Isaiah 58 (58:3-4^v). Unless our decisions are just, and our actions and words are righteous, fasting is just a show. Fasting is a time to lay one's heart out before the LORD to be examined and to repent, change, and seek His direction (Psalm 139:23-24^v). Isaiah said that if we abuse our workers and fight with our neighbors while we are fasting we've missed the whole point. Instead it should be a time when we help the needy and oppressed (Isaiah 58:6-7^{vi}). What is the result of our fasts, or for that matter of our worship or our Bible studies? If it is just a routine and we go about our lives like every other worldly person, self-focused and unconcerned about others and even lacking conviction for our own sins, our religious routine is hypocrisy.

To those who heard Zechariah's word from the LORD, it should have put the fear of God in their hearts. God was saying that they were no better off now than when they went into captivity for their hearts were unchanged. And for the unrepentant who think that saying the right prayer will get them into heaven without a change of heart, the effect of Zechariah's words should be the same. Are we new creations in Christ, sharing His heart for a lost world, or just going through the motions and living selfishly? Do we care about one another or are we just seeing what we can gain from those we encounter? Do we share God's heart for those in need?

The nation had gone into captivity because they had welcomed idolatry that promised them success if they would just make sacrifices to those god's of stone or metal. It had little or nothing to do with how they treated their fellow man. Zechariah's prophecy was telling them the only thing that changed was that idol had become their financial prosperity. **The motions of religion were gone through with the same goal as their former idol worship. "It's all about me."** The rituals of Christianity can be the same. Why do we go to church on Sunday and to a Bible study? Is it because you love God and want to know His Word so that He can direct your life? Or is it to meet people and have a social life and maybe even a business contact or two? We can slip into the same type of *me-ism*. Loving God our Creator will flow into loving your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:37-40^{vii}). If it doesn't, we are only fooling ourselves about why we are part of a congregation. Love covers a multitude of sins (1 Peter 4:8^{viii}).

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." Zechariah 7:8-10 The second prophecy came to Zechariah. The first prophecy came in the form of questions to have them examine their hearts and a reminder of their past. It was a powerful warning from God. If

heeded it would have changed the course of Jewish history. Instead, they started building oral laws and traditions to keep them from breaking the letter of the Law while carving out exceptions to break the Spirit behind the Law. Instead of hearts open to God, they chose the path of ritual and routine like all other false religions.

The second prophecy gave them examples of what their lives would look like if they were to truly open their hearts to God. They would render true judgments. This was not only to denounce bribing judges, but also true judgments about what was right or wrong in daily life. In other words, to be uncompromising when tempted by potential personal gain, whether financial or to obtain favor. This went along with the sixth and seventh visions we looked at earlier.

The second was to show kindness and mercy to one another. Kindness is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22^x). God has been kind and merciful to us, therefore, we should show the same attributes to our fellow man. Oppressing the weak, whether a widow, the fatherless, foreigner, or poor, was a problem in that day. It compares to using cheap labor and under paying them in our day. People can be so needy they will work for bread, and some unscrupulous people take advantage of their situation.

God's heart goes out to the weak and the poor. Our fallen world leaves many vulnerable. Those who exploit them are heaping up wrath against themselves for the Day of Judgment (Romans 2:5^x). Those who care for the poor and weak are laying up treasures in heaven (Matthew 25:34-40^{xi}). They are demonstrating the kindness and mercy in the heart of God.

And the last issue was devising evil against another in the heart. This is an issue Jesus condemned. He declared hatred in the heart to be the same as the sin of murder (Matthew 5:22^{xii}). I have seen people exaggerate words that were said, trying to influence others to take their side against a person to have their way. We can attribute motives to a person without really knowing what their motives are, and in the process, demonize them. Show kindness and mercy. Jesus said, "If you want to be forgiven, you should forgive as the Lord forgave you." Matthew 6:14^{xiii} Until we know otherwise we should always think the best of someone. Even when we know they have done wrong, we should hope for their repentance and restoration (Galatians 6:1^{xiv}).

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. Zechariah 7:11-12 This is the main indictment against Judah before they went into captivity, refusal to hear! The Hebrew word implies they would not pay attention. It entered their ears, but they refused to take it to heart and accept what God was telling them. They intentionally turned a stubborn shoulder. That means they knew what God was saying but stubbornly went their own way in defiance. They stopped their ears. When the prophets spoke, they covered their ears so as not to be convicted by the words that were spoken (Jeremiah 11:10^{xv}). We can easily do the same when the Spirit whispers.

"They made their hearts diamond-hard." This is the only time this phrase is used in Scripture. How descriptive! Consider what that says about God's faithfulness to try to speak to them and to us. Diamonds are formed under great pressure. God was faithfully speaking to them through the law and the words the Spirit spoke through the prophets. Day after day, month after month and year after year the Spirit spoke through prophet after prophet convicting their hearts to turn from their wicked ways. Refusal after refusal to yield to that conviction over decades of hearing the cry of the prophets was God's faithful pressure to turn them from ritual to a relationship with Him, but instead they let it turn their hearts diamond-hard.

If you want to invest in the wrath of God, just refuse all the grace and mercy He sends your way through the Word, through His messengers, through the faithful conviction of the Holy Spirit. Call yourself a Christian and live like the world. Misrepresent Him so those who never heard the message see Christianity as a hypocritical belief. But if you feel the pressure, let God change you before it is too late. He declared that He can take a heart of stone and transform it into a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 11:19^{xvi}). If you are breathing it is not too late for that miraculous transformation.

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." Zechariah 7:13-14 Refuse the consistent and faithful love of God to direct us in the ways of righteousness long enough and we leave God with only one option, which is to give us the justice we deserve. When it hits, and it surely will, we cry out to God to help us. Usually it is not because we want to change, but because we want His mercy while we stubbornly insist in walking in rebellion. He won't hear that kind of prayer (Jeremiah 7:16^{xvii}).

God did everything possible to turn Judah from their path of destruction, but they insisted in rebellion. He did what He had promised in His Word and scattered them among the nations as captives in a foreign land (Deuteronomy 28:36^{xviii}). The once verdant and blessed land of Israel became desolate. Now that they returned to the land, they had to deal with the bareness left to them by the sins of their fathers.

Sin affects the generations that follow. If you love your children and grandchildren, hear the Lord and His Word (Deuteronomy 7:9^{xix}). Walk in the ways of righteousness. Keep your heart tender toward the Holy Spirit and you and your children will inherit a blessing.

These were the first two prophecies from the Lord in answer to the question of whether or not they should fast over the destruction of the temple while it was being rebuilt. Did you notice it was not yet a direct answer? God was asking them to come into a deeper relationship with Him and get serious about the condition of their hearts. It wasn't just about losing the temple and its restoration. It was about their hearts that had changed little over the seventy years of captivity. It was about their refusal to hear the words of the Lord. Most of all it was about their selfish greed and how it affected others.

Do we need to fast, repent, and ask God to soften our hearts to the Holy Spirit? Or do we just want to be comfortable going through our religious routines while we dream of the next business deal, upcoming entertainment, or delicious meal? What is in our hearts when we gather as believers? That determines whether we need to fast.

That was God's first two teachings. We can be like our fathers who left us this spiritually barren land, or we can break our hearts open to hear and obey the Spirit of God and His Word (Psalm 51:17^{xx}). **How we need to keep the price paid for our sins on the cross ever before us!** What if Jesus allowed Himself to fall into selfishness and was in the world just to please Himself? You and I would be on our way to eternal judgment. He kept the Father's love and will always before Him (John 5:30^{xxi}). Fasting is self-denial, and Jesus' entire life was that for others. Therefore, His whole life was a fast that God chose. Listen to how Isaiah described it in Isaiah 58:6-14: *⁶ "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? ⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? ⁸ Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. ⁹ Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, 'Here I am.' If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, ¹⁰ if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday. ¹¹ And the LORD will guide you continually and satisfy your desire in scorched places and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail. ¹² And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in. ¹³ "If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on my holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the LORD honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly; ¹⁴ then you shall take delight in the LORD, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."* Now let us follow Jesus' perfect example and live a life of love just as He loved us (Ephesians 5:2^{xxii}). Should we fast? Let us live the fast God chose for us.

Questions

- 1 What was the question at hand? 2 What was the first answer?
- 3 What is your motivation for being here today?
- 4 What was the second Word from the Lord?
- 5 How does that coincide with Isaiah 58?
- 6 What is the important thing in fasting?
- 7 What is God's heart in this matter?
- 8 What was the warning from their forefathers' examples?
- 9 Why didn't God just say yes or no? 10 How did Jesus exemplify the correct fast?

ⁱ **Haggai 1:13-14 (NIV)**

¹³ Then Haggai, the LORD's messenger, gave this message of the LORD to the people: "I am with you," declares the LORD. ¹⁴ So the LORD stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of the whole remnant of the people. They came and began to work on the house of the LORD Almighty, their God,

ⁱⁱ **Zechariah 6:12-13 (ESV)**

¹² And say to him, 'Thus says the LORD of hosts, "Behold, the man whose name is the Branch: for he shall branch out from his place, and he shall build the temple of the LORD.

¹³ It is he who shall build the temple of the LORD and shall bear royal honor, and shall sit and rule on his throne. And there shall be a priest on his throne, and the counsel of peace shall be between them both.'"

ⁱⁱⁱ **Genesis 3:11 (ESV)**

¹¹ He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?"

^{iv} **Isaiah 58:3-4 (ESV)**

³ 'Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?' Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers.

⁴ Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high.

^v **Psalms 139:23-24 (ESV)**

²³ Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts!

²⁴ And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!

^{vi} **Isaiah 58:6-7 (ESV)**

⁶ "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? ⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?"

^{vii} **Matthew 22:37-40 (ESV)**

³⁷ And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.

³⁸ This is the great and first commandment.

³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."

^{viii} **1 Peter 4:8 (ESV)**

⁸ Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.

^{ix} **Galatians 5:22 (ESV)**

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,

^x **Romans 2:5 (ESV)**

⁵ But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.

^{xi} **Matthew 25:34-40 (ESV)**

³⁴ Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink?

³⁸ And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? ³⁹ And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' ⁴⁰ And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'

^{xii} **Matthew 5:22 (ESV)**

²² But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire.

^{xiii} **Matthew 6:14 (ESV)**

¹⁴ For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you,

^{xiv} **Galatians 6:1 (ESV)**

¹ Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.

^{xv} **Jeremiah 11:10 (ESV)**

¹⁰ They have turned back to the iniquities of their forefathers, who refused to hear my words. They have gone after other gods to serve them. The house of Israel and the house of Judah have broken my covenant that I made with their fathers.

^{xvi} **Ezekiel 11:19 (ESV)**

¹⁹ And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh,

^{xvii} **Jeremiah 7:16 (ESV)**

¹⁶ "As for you, do not pray for this people, or lift up a cry or prayer for them, and do not intercede with me, for I will not hear you.

^{xviii} **Deuteronomy 28:36 (ESV)**

³⁶ "The LORD will bring you and your king whom you set over you to a nation that neither you nor your fathers have known. And there you shall serve other gods of wood and stone.

^{xix} **Deuteronomy 7:9 (ESV)**

⁹ Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations,

^{xx} **Psalms 51:17 (ESV)**

¹⁷ The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

^{xxi} **John 5:30 (ESV)**

³⁰ "I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me.

^{xxii} **Ephesians 5:2 (ESV)**

² And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.