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[0 : 00] Zechariah chapter 7. The place is Jerusalem.

That's where we find ourselves in Zechariah chapter 7. The time is now the 7th of December, 518 BC, 518 years before Christ.

And the time in Zechariah 7 is also 20 years after the night that Zechariah received all these visions. And so it's important that we get that in our minds.

We think that we go from chapter to chapter and it's day by day. But chapter 1 to 6 all happens in the space of a few hours on one night. And chapter 7 is now fast forwarded 20 years on past that night.

And as I've said with the children, these visions, when we put all these visions together, if we just glance back through these chapters, we see that God, through these visions that are given to Zechariah, he's calling his people to come to him.

[1 : 17] He's calling his people to return to him. He's calling his people who had become preoccupied with their own homes, their own panelled houses, their own priorities, their own comfort.

He's called them once more to worship him and to serve him. And in particular, there was that call that they would give themselves to the rebuilding of the temple, this place that God had set aside for worship.

So through these visions, there's that recall of God's people to come to him and to serve him.

And the question that obviously we ask now is, well, what's happened in the last 20 years? 20 years is quite a long time.

And so what happened in these 20 years since Zechariah woke up? And on the face of it, quite a lot has happened. There's actually been very good progress in terms of the calling that God had placed upon his people.

[2 : 23] There haven't been any huge interruptions to the building work that they were called to. The enemies of God's people who were very active for a period now seem to have calmed down.

And they're pretty much leaving them alone to get on with the work that God called them to do. And so progress in terms of the construction has been good. We know from Ezra chapter 6 that in two years time from this point, that the whole of the rebuilding of the temple will be completed.

So things were looking up. There was reason for God's people to be encouraged. And yet, as part of the religious routines that God's people were going through, they were still regularly mourning and fasting.

Just the same way that they had been mourning and fasting in the darkest years of exile. So that's the context.

There's reason to be encouraged. Progress has been good. They're almost at the end of this building project. They have peace. They're enjoying blessings.

- [3 : 43] There's reason to be encouraged. But God's people were still going through all the routines of mourning and fasting, as they had done in the darkest of years.
- And the question that emerges in Zechariah chapter 7 is, why were they doing what they're doing? All this mourning and all this fasting and these fixed religious routines that they were so conscientious in following, why were they doing it?
- And should they still be doing it? Sometimes we get asked the question, don't we? Why do you do what you do?
- And why do you do it the way you do it? When I set the fire, I get the newspaper and I get two sheets of the newspaper.
- I roll them up together and I kind of tie a knot on them and I press them down on the fire and I get maybe three or four of them and then I put the kindlers on top and then I put the coal on top of the kindlers.
- [4 : 58] And that's the way I've always set the fire. And I suppose the reason I've always set the fire that way is because that's how I watch my parents always setting the fire. Two sheets, roll them up, tie them reasonably tight, kindlers on top, coal on top of that.
- One day though, after I got married, one day when I was setting the fire and it wasn't lighting very quickly, Mary asked the question, why do you roll the paper so tight?
- Why do you get these two sheets and roll it so tight and tie a knot? Will that not make the whole thing harder to light? She said it like that, but more angry.
- And it was a question, to be honest, I'd never asked before. Why do you do what you do? I just do it. Just for the record, that is the best way to light a fire.
- But it's good sometimes to be asked the question, why do you do what you do? Just so you can be assured of your own righteousness. Not always though. That's the question that was on the minds of the people of Bethel.
- [6 : 11] Why are we doing what we're doing? So they take this question about mourning and fasting and they take it to God. That's the first point, their question to God.
- Verse 1, That was the question, their question to God.
- Should I mourn and fast in the fifth month as I have done for so many years? Their stomachs are rumbling. It's never a pleasant thing to be mourning and fasting.
- And so somebody asks the sensible question, why are we doing this? Now for 70 plus years, this is what they had always been doing. Fasting.
- There were four months that they'd set aside for fasting. In the fourth month, they fasted to lament over the time when the walls of Jerusalem were breached by King Nebuchadnezzar's army.
- [7 : 33] You can read about that in 2 Kings 25 and Jeremiah 52. So that was their first fast, fourth month, when the walls were breached. They remembered it, they lamented over it, they fasted and they prayed as they thought back on this miserable event.
- In the fifth month, they fasted to lament over the burning of the temple. That dark, awful day when the temple, that place where they came to worship, that was burned.
- You can read the account there in 2 Kings 25 again in Jeremiah 52. That was the second of the fasts that they observed. In the seventh month, they fasted again.
- They fasted to mourn for the anniversary of the assassination of one of their past governors, Gedaliah, governor of Jerusalem.
- They remember that day when he was assassinated. You can read about that in 2 Kings 25 or Jeremiah 41 if you want to look at that later on. But they remembered that event, that traumatic event in their history.

[8 : 40] And they fasted and they mourned as they remembered it. And in the tenth month, they had another fast. They fasted to mourn the beginning of Nebuchadnezzar's siege of Jerusalem.

And again, we have records of that in 2 Kings 25, Jeremiah 39, Ezekiel 24. It was a dark day. So four dark days in their history.

And God's people, they had appointed fasts where they would remember and lament and refrain from food and water in these days.

Now, that's what was going on. And that's what had been going on for decades. The question is, how many of these fasts had God commanded?

And the answer is none. Did that make these fasts wrong? Well, it did make these fasts wrong in the first place when things were dark and when they felt a sense as a nation, as God's people of their need and of their vulnerability and of the sense that God must help them.

[10 : 07] It was a sensible thing for them to say, well, let's have a fast and let's have a day of prayer. So it wasn't a wrong thing to fast. It was right in that dark context that they would fast and pray.

But now, the walls of the temple were no longer broken down. And the temple was no longer burned down. In fact, the temple was almost rebuilt.

And they had a new governor in place and he was a man's rule of hell that God was using for the rebuilding for his own purposes. And Jerusalem was no longer under siege.

The exile was over. So fasting and mourning, what they had always done, it just made no sense.

And yet, these religious traditions of fasting and mourning and feasting after the fasting, these traditions that had come on to their calendars and which were observed so meticulously, they just rumbled on and on and on.

[11 : 30] And so, it was a sensible question for the people of Bethel to bring to God. Why are we doing what we're doing? Should we still be fasting?

Why are we doing what we're doing? that was their question to God. And you know, that's a question that we should we should always be asking.

They as a people and still we as a people are people who fixate on traditions. We are very quick to get into religious rhythms.

and habits. And some can be helpful. Others are not. I remember once having to lead a service, a communion service in a place.

Some years back, it wasn't whilst I've been here. And I was given instructions about how to do the communion part of the service.

[12 : 44] I was given actually a page and a half of A4 of instructions by the elders who wanted me to come on the Saturday and kind of go through a rehearsal of how they would do things.

And there was about 15 stages of sitting and standing. So you would sit and that was a signal for the elders to come forward and then you would stand and that would be a signal for the elders to sit.

And then you would move one side and one would come this way and you'd put your hand there and the bread would come this way and the wine would come from a different angle. You were forever up and down like a yo-yo on this chair.

And it was beyond confusing. I was confused. It was very obvious that the elders were confused. So I asked the question, why are you doing this?

Why are you doing what you're doing? And their answer was because we've always done it this way. It was a poor answer.

[13 : 44] I said, well let's not do it this way tomorrow. And we changed it. You know, what we do and what we don't do it should be biblical and it should be driven by a desire to worship God sincerely and to reach out with the message of the gospel.

So their question to God, why are we doing what we're doing? It was a good question to ask. And as we look around and as we think about the traditions and the habits that we have in terms of the life of the church, in terms of our own spiritual lives, we should regularly ask the question.

Why are we doing what we're doing? And sometimes why are we not doing what we're not doing? Because we've always done it is not a good answer.

And because we've never done it is also not a good answer. Weerspeed, the commentator, said, traditions are a guide, not a jailer.

So that was their question to God. First point. Second point is God's question to them. Essentially it's the same question that's turned back on them.

[15 : 17] God says to them, tell me why were you doing these things over these decades whilst these fasts and feasts were ongoing, why were you doing them?

Then the word of the Lord, verse 4, 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? We can imagine the potentially uncomfortable silence as the question bounced back to them.

and as they looked at each other and as they thought about things, why were they fasting these 70 years?

That's the question that was coming back to them. Was it because of a genuine sense of grief that was connected to these dark days? And this fasting and feasting that they were doing, did it cause them sincerely to repent and to turn away from the sin that had caused them to be in exile in the first place?

[16 : 31] Did it stir within them that earnest prayer? That was the question that God was asking. Why were you fasting? And where were you feasting?

And this question that God was asking, it wasn't the first time that he was asking this question. He says that through Zechariah in verse 7, 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?

See, before the people of God were taken into the dark days, before they were brought into captivity, when things were going okay for them, and when they were going through their religious routines, God knew that these routines that they were going through in times of peace, although they were very precise about what they were doing and how they were doing it, often these routines and their religion was disconnected from their hearts.

And the God who searches the heart saw that, and he challenged them in the peaceful times through his prophets time and time again, and he's challenging his people in this time as well, when Zechariah is being used to speak to God's people.

And it's a reminder for us in application. God sees the heart. He doesn't just see what we do in our religion.

[18 : 21] He doesn't just see the outward appearance, and how we look on a Sunday, and what we do as part of our religious activities.

He sees not only what we're doing, but he sees the reasons for which we do it. Our God is a God who sees under the surface.

some of us have in the past had to have a PET scan. I've never had a PET scan before, but I know some who have.

And it's a scan that goes deep. It goes under the surface. And it analyzes how healthy all the cells in the body are.

and for these people back then, and for us today, Zechariah 7 takes us through a spiritual PET scan. And God looks under the surface of all our religious routines.

[19 : 27] God looks under the surface of why are we sitting here tonight? Why are we doing what we're doing? God is the God who sees the reasons for this, the motivation for this.

and he asks us the question that they first came to him with, why are you doing what you're doing?

Why are you and I here? You know, it's so important in application here that what we do on the outside has a vital connection with what is going on on the inside.

you know, we stand up, we look at the screens, we open our mouths, we make the noise, the note, but is the action of what we're doing and the volume and the words that are coming out of our mouths, are they truly praise?

Flowing from our hearts? and when we sit around the Lord's table as I spoke about earlier on, and when we take the bread, we take the wine into our mouths, are we truly remembering the Lord's death as we do these things?

[20 : 50] things? Or even if you take this month, you know, we look forward to Christmas, we do festive things, but are they truly prompted by a genuine thankfulness for the coming of the Lord Jesus?

These are questions that we need to keep on asking, so that what we do on the outside is actually genuine and true and connected with our hearts.

It's God's question to them, why are you doing what you're doing? Third point here, we see that God spoke, this is into their history, as God speaks to them about the past, and as God speaks to them also about the dangers in the future.

God spoke, but they didn't listen. What does God say in verse 8? 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 depress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor. In your hearts, do not think evil of each other. That's what God is saying to them.

[22 : 13] God is saying to them, I see your fasts, I see your feasts. But this is what I want from you. Then the commentator says God spoke to them again in verse 8.

He said, you are trying to please me by performing religious ceremonies, but you are not behaving correctly. we tend to think God is looking very closely at us when we're sitting in these chairs and we're doing our Sunday things.

God is looking very closely at every aspect of our lives. And he says to his people, you're coming with a question about religion.

this is what I'm looking for from you. I'm looking at your whole lives. And what we're being taught here repeatedly in this chapter is that it's not about ticking the kind of churchy boxes.

it's not what it means to be a Christian. You know, it's not about being seen and recognized in our community as one of the religious people.

[23 : 36] It's not about being in church on Sunday with a nicely pressed suit and perfect makeup. It's not about having your face seen on the high holy days. It's about every day.

True worship it's not simply what's going on in these four walls for these two hours. It's about how we are in the office.

It's about how we are when we meet with people on the main street. It's about how we conduct ourselves in our homes with the people who know us best.

It's about how we play on the sports field. It's about how we behave in the classroom. God is saying to his people, I'm not looking for Sunday religion.

I'm looking for lives of integrity. integrity. That was his message to his people in 518 BC and that's still his word to us here in 2019 AD.

[25 : 02] And just to be clear, we know and let me say it again, we are not saved by living lives of absolute integrity because we just can't do it.

We're not saved by the works of mercy and necessity and social justice that we might give ourselves to. We're not saved by being nice to each other.

We're saved by faith in Christ. But as we're reminded in that little book of James that we studied not long ago, faith without works is dead.

So how we live matters. And that's what God was saying to them. But generation after generation they didn't listen.

Now we could do a survey looking back and we could leap forward and we could see that God's people repeatedly, although God said the same thing to them time and time again, they didn't listen.

[26 : 13] Verse 11, God says to Zechariah, 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 a spirit through the earlier prophets.

So the Lord Almighty was very angry. God spoke. He made demands on them as his people but they didn't listen.

Are you and I listening tonight to what God is saying to us? As God the Holy Spirit, as he gets under the surface of our lives, as he analyzes what we're doing and why we're doing it, are we listening to him?

Am I listening? God's people, they didn't listen. They hadn't in the past and they were in danger of repeating this again.

And then God says in the final point in this chapter, they spoke. They spoke. But God didn't listen. when I called, verse 13, they did not listen.

[27 : 38] So when they called, I would not listen, says the Lord Almighty. I scattered them with a whirlwind among the nations where they were strangers.

The land was left so desolate behind them that no one could come or go. This is how they made the land pleasant, the pleasant land, sorry, desolate.

And the last few sentences there really just give a summary of all the years leading up to the exile. And then these years of exile, the people of God, they were going through the motions.

They were still doing their religion. They were still bringing their sacrifices. They were still making their prayers. But God was not accepting their worship.

And God was not listening. Is God listening to what we are saying to him in prayer and bringing to him this evening?

[28 : 56] I was reading a little bit about a concentration camp, Belsum concentration camp.

And at Christmas time, the German officers who were charged with assassinating thousands in the gas chambers, he took a break.

I think it was Christmas Eve. They went from the gas chambers through to the kind of makeshift chapel. They sang the Christmas carols.

They read the Bible passages. They read out the prayers. And they closed the books. They went back through and they gassed thousands more.

was God listening to their prayers? Was God accepting their worship? No, he wasn't. And that was what God was saying to his people over these years when they were wayward.

[30 : 14] It was the same message that Amos 5 brought. God says through Amos and Amos 5, I hate. Listen to these words. I hate.

I despise your religious feasts. I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them.

Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them, away with the noise of your songs. I will not listen to the music of your harps, but let justice roll on like a river.

Righteousness like a never-failing stream. the message here is not complicated as we finish.

If we live double lives, if we are people who are saying one thing but doing another, if we are people who are knowingly putting on a mask of hypocrisy, to show ourselves to be God's people, and yet we are not repenting of sin, and we are not asking God to cleanse us and to deal with our dark hearts, then we might fool others, but we won't fool God, and he will not accept our worship, and he will not hear our prayers, and he will not save our souls.

[32 : 14] So what do we do? Having been searched through Zechariah 7, what do we do? We confess our sin.

Hour by hour, we repent of the sin that is in us. We ask that God would be merciful to us, sinners. We ask that he would show us his grace, and we ask that he would enable us by his spirit to live lives, lives of life, lives of integrity, lives of integrity, lives that show forth the fruits of the spirit, and mark us out as distinct, salty, God's people, in a dark world.

They spoke, but God didn't listen. May it not be said of us that as we speak, because of what we're harboring in our hearts, God does not listen.

we pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for this passage, and we thank you for the fact that you are the God who searches us, and you are the God who knows us, and we confess readily that we sin, and we falter, and we fail, and we know that we grieve the Holy Spirit, and some of the things that we do, and say, and think.

We thank you that there is forgiveness in and through Christ. We thank you that if we are truly people who are repenting, and who are believing in Jesus, there is the promise of purification from all unrighteousness.

[34 : 29] There is the promise of the help of the Holy Spirit, as we would seek to live lives which are worthy of the calling that we have received. So we pray, Lord, that you would cleanse us from our sin.

We pray that you would fill us with the Holy Spirit, so that we live lives which are lives of integrity, where our hearts are tuned to praise you, and where our lives show that fact out in every aspect of our living, that we are your people, who seek to praise your name.

We thank you that even though this passage ends with that sobering note, as we look over the page, we are given encouragement after encouragement.

God did not wash his hands of his people, but we thank you that in the words that follow, there are rich promises promises from a gracious God who is calling his people to live close to him.

Enable us, we pray, to live close to you, and enable us, we pray, to glorify you in the way that we live, and we pray this in Jesus' name.

[35 : 49] Amen. And I may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of God the Holy Spirit, be with us all, both now and forever more.

Amen. Amen.