

Parish Fellowship Bible Study – Monday 9 May 2022

Zechariah 7 – 8

Justice and Mercy, Not Fasting

7 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.

2 The people of Bethel had sent Sharezer and Regem-Melech, together with their men, to entreat the LORD

3 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?"

4 Then the word of the LORD Almighty came to me:

5 "Ask all the people of the land and the priests, 'When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months for the past seventy years, was it really for me that you fasted?

6 And when you were eating and drinking, were you not just feasting for yourselves?

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?"

8 And the word of the LORD came again to Zechariah:

9 "This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another.

10 Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor. In your hearts do not think evil of each other.'

11 "But they refused to pay attention; stubbornly they turned their backs and stopped up their ears.

¹² 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.

¹³ "When I called, they did not listen; so when they called, I would not listen," says the LORD Almighty.

¹⁴ "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. This is how they made the pleasant land desolate."

The Lord promises to Bless Jerusalem

8.1 Again the word of the Lord Almighty came to me.

2. This is what the LORD Almighty says: "I am very jealous for Zion; I am burning with jealousy for her."

³ This is what the Lord says: "I will return to Zion and dwell in Jerusalem. Then Jerusalem will be called the City of Truth, and the mountain of the LORD Almighty will be called the Holy Mountain."

⁴ This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Once again men and women of ripe old age will sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each of them with cane in hand because of his age.

⁵ The city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there."

⁶ This is what the LORD Almighty says: "It may seem marvellous to the remnant of this people at that time, but will it seem marvellous to me?" declares the LORD Almighty.

⁷ This is what the LORD Almighty says: "I will save my people from the countries of the east and the west.

⁸ I will bring them back to live in Jerusalem; they will be my people, and I will be faithful and righteous to them as their God."

⁹ This is what the LORD Almighty says: "You who now hear these words spoken by the prophets who were there when the foundation was laid for the house of the Lord Almighty, let your hands be strong so that the temple may be built."

¹⁰ Before that time there were no wages for man or beast. No one could go about his business safely because of his enemy, for I had turned every man against his neighbour.

¹¹ But now I will not deal with the remnant of this people as I did in the past," declares the LORD Almighty.

¹² "The seed will grow well, the vine will yield its fruit, the ground will produce its crops, and the heavens will drop their dew. I will give all these things as an inheritance to the remnant of this people.

¹³ As you have been an object of cursing among the nations, O Judah and Israel, so will I save you, and you will be a blessing. Do not be afraid, but let your hands be strong."

¹⁴ This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Just as I had determined to bring disaster upon you and showed no pity when your fathers angered me," says the LORD Almighty,

¹⁵ "so now I have determined to do good again to Jerusalem and Judah. Do not be afraid.

¹⁶ These are the things you are to do: Speak the truth to each other, and render true and sound judgment in your courts;

¹⁷ do not plot evil against your neighbour, and do not love to swear falsely. I hate all this," declares the LORD.

¹⁸ Again the word of the Lord Almighty came to me.

¹⁹ This is what the LORD Almighty says: "The fasts of the fourth, fifth, seventh and tenth months will become joyful and glad occasions and happy festivals for Judah. Therefore love truth and peace."

²⁰ This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Many peoples and the inhabitants of many cities will yet come,

²¹ and the inhabitants of one city will go to another and say, 'Let us go at once to entreat the LORD and seek the LORD Almighty. I myself am going.'

²² And many peoples and powerful nations will come to Jerusalem to seek the LORD Almighty and to entreat him.”

²³ This is what the LORD Almighty says: “In those days ten men from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, ‘Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you.’”

Introduction

Zechariah 7-8 begins with a short report about a delegation from Bethel seeking instruction about fasting. This provides an occasion for Zechariah to reapply pertinent covenant requirements to the people and restate the hope for restoration. Note these two Chapters 7-8 transition the two main parts of the book.

God's wrath is the ultimate explanation for Jerusalem's destruction and the Babylonian exile. The people's sins of oppression and lack of compassion brought on God's wrath. God's wrath meant He stopped listening to the prayers of a hypocritical people and let them suffer what they deserved.

The people of Judah, a once proud nation with a glorious sacred history with names of Abraham, Moses, Samuel, David and Isaiah. For a century they had been knocked around by the world powers, kicked and mocked, used and abused. They were in danger of losing all connection with that past, losing their magnificent identity as God's people.

Zechariah was a major factor in recovering the magnificence from the ruins of a degrading exile. He reinvigorated their imaginations with his visions and messages. The visions provided images of a sovereign God that worked their way into the lives of the people, countering the long ordeal of debasement and ridicule. The messages forged a fresh vocabulary that gave energy and credibility to the long-term purposes of God being worked out in their lives.

Zechariah's enigmatic visions working at multiple levels and his poetically charged messages are at work still like time capsules in the lives of God's people, continuing to release insight and hope and clarity for the people whom God is using to work out his purposes in a world that has no language for God and the purposes of God.

Along with Haggai, Zechariah flourished between 520 BC and 518 BC luring the people of Judah and Jerusalem to do the following:

- rebuild the temple under the leadership of Zerubbabel
- re-establish a purified priesthood under Joshua
- cast off foreign influences on their religious life
- live proper moral lives

Zechariah's ministry seems to have been highly successful. The Temple was rebuilt by 515 BC; the priesthood established control and order over the worship and sacrifice in Jerusalem. People were challenged to moral purity. Zechariah's expectation was for God's people to experience the bounteous blessings of God. Probably many did but the subsequent ministry of a prophet like Malachi and the careers of Ezra and Nehemiah show that the people did not respond whole heartedly to the call to throw off foreign influence and live morally. Their failure was the failure of God's people in each generation, however, and not an indication of the failure of Zechariah.

Chapter 7

God seeks righteousness – not ritual.

God has always rejected selfish, insincere worship rituals.

7:1 The people were exiled in 597 BC, and the city of Jerusalem and its Temple destroyed by King Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC.

The word of the Lord came again to Zechariah almost two years after the night visions and two years before the Temple was completed 518BC. Kisler a Babylonian month name for the ninth month (Hebrew).

7:2 A delegation from Bethel – some 12 miles north of Jerusalem – came to see the Jerusalem prophets which included Zechariah – their purpose to seek God's favour. This visitation took place in the fifth month and commemorates the destruction of the Temple by Nebuchadnezzar.

7:3 With the near completion of the Temple the delegation asks if they must continue to mourn and fast which has gone on for seventy years.

7:5 This seventh month is another commemoration of the assassination of Gedaliah which Nebuchadnezzar appointed as Governor to Judah.

Zechariah challenges the delegation about their motives in fasting and mourning. "Did you eat and drink at the religious festivals e.g., Passover, Weeks, Tabernacles for God or for their own benefit". The implication is that their motives have been selfish and insincere. Jesus likewise taught that repentance and humility before God is more important than fasting. Luke 18: 9-14.

The captivity generated several fasts as described but none of which were commanded by God. Whether fasting or eating they did not factor God into their thinking.

7:7 The earlier prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel proclaimed that having a personal relationship with God and obeying His word is more important than religious ritual. Isaiah 1: 10-11 Jeremiah 7

Had they heeded the preaching of the pre-exilic prophets, the captivity could have been averted.

Zechariah draws attention to the once prosperity of the Negev 50 miles south of Jerusalem with grazing and agriculture. Also the central highlands and coast. Here people lived and worked in peace and prosperity in the pre-exilic times.

7: 8-10 God seeks justice, mercy and compassion. Justice is first and foremost found in God and enshrined in the Mosaic covenant. Zechariah provides an excellent response. It is mercy and compassion and bringing of balance into things gone wrong for widows, orphans, foreigners or the poor and it extends to thoughts and motivation. These Old Testament categories translate into present day as those who are the vulnerable people of society, those who have no one to speak for them. Justice begins as an attitude of love in the heart. This expresses itself in actions defending those whom society easily defrauds. This is a universal biblical principle. 1 John 3:17 Obedience to God requires justice, mercy and compassion towards others. The way we treat others shows how obedient we are to God.

7: 11-12 God is angry when His people reject his inspired teaching. God's people lived on God's word. The prophetic word consistently taught Israel to establish justice for the needy with mercy and compassion. Israel knew what was right but refused to listen. Their

inner self (mind, will and emotion) became as hard as a diamond to the will of God presented through the prophets. They paid for their rebellion. A people have reached God's limit when they adamantly refuse to listen to his word. However, God's law and prophets had become authoritative for Zechariah's generation. We cannot know the content of these materials but we can see that the principle of written authoritative teachings had been formulated. The Holy Spirit is the ultimate source of such scriptures. Obedience is the expected response to them.

The Holy Spirit of God gave various gifts to people in the Old Testament. The most frequently mentioned gift was the gift of prophecy. The Spirit is so closely associated with prophecy that Peter could write that prophecy came through men who were moved by the Spirit. 2 Peter 1:21. The shocking truth is Zechariah's summary of the reactions to the prophets. God's people would not listen to his word and obey it. Revelation does not help if it is not obeyed. It is obedience to God that truly affirms love for him. 1 John 5: 3.

7:13 Because the people refused to listen to God he shut his ears to their prayers. He also scattered them with a whirlwind among all nations. This concept is simply expressed by one Hebrew word - "blew them away in a storm"

7:14 Their disobedience reversed the prosperous situation of V7 and left a desolate land. Had they heeded the preaching of the preexilic prophets the captivity could have been averted. It is obedience to God that truly affirms love for him. 1 John 5: 13.

Chapter 8

God in His jealousy restored his faithful remnant

V 1-17 Looking at verses 1-17 Zechariah's message of hope reaches a climax. Note the frequency of the title Lord Almighty – the divine title expressing Jehovah's covenant faithfulness coupled with power and authority. The promises that seemed too fantastic to be possible were certain because of who made the promises – The Lord Almighty.

V2 "I am very jealous for Zion" - intensive expressions describing God's fervent passion and zeal for his people. He is concerned for what is rightly his and he is willing to overthrow all opposition to defend it.

V3 God has turned to his people with mercy - the exile is over and He will dwell in Jerusalem after the completion of the temple when His glory returns. Both Ezekiel 43 and Malachi 3 anticipate the return of God to His temple – a dwelling that is fulfilled in Jesus. John 1:14. Then Jerusalem will be the "Faithful City" as its inhabitants reflect God's character. Mount Zion – the holy mountain – the temple site in Jerusalem. It will be the "Holy Mountain" because God will dwell upon it. This holiness expands from the temple through Jerusalem and Judah.

V4-5 A picture of great prosperity emerges. The elderly and children were the first to perish when cities were besieged. Now the elderly are of "ripe old age" and have time to sit while boys and girls play in the city streets – open spaces between their homes (V6). It may seem marvellous to the remnant but not from God's point of view. God has still issues with his people.

V7 God will rescue his people from different exile countries. All will return to Jerusalem.

V8 From everywhere – wherever the people are, will be God's saving activity providing salvation from earthly distress. Its purpose is to create a faithful obedient people – a covenant people. God used covenant language to renew his relationship with his people and reminded them of his eternal purpose to create a people with whom he could live in a relationship of faithfulness and righteousness. God looks to the day when what always should have been, will actually happen. Thus Judah's restoration to covenant favour and blessing rests on the faithfulness (keeping his word with truthfulness and dependability) and righteousness of God (doing what is right).

V9-11 The section speaks of difficult times ahead but in view of the glorious future those who were still living in the ruins were exhorted to work diligently in rebuilding the temple. Here prophecy is an effective motivator to service. "Let your hands be strong" calls for courage so that they can finish building the temple. Remember when the foundation of the temple was laid on return of the exiles under Zerubbabel some twenty years earlier. Then all worked stopped and the people lost hope. God raised up the prophets Haggai and Zechariah who encouraged the people's building efforts.

V12-13 The curse will be replaced by blessing. God's provision will include vineyards, agriculture and vegetable farming – all watered by God's blessing upon the remnant.

V14 God's wrath is the ultimate explanation for Jerusalem's destruction and the exile. The people's sins of oppression and lack of compassion brought on God's wrath. This meant he stopped listening to the prayers of a hypocritical people and let them suffer what they deserved. Sin angers God. He intervenes to finish but this is not his final word. He seeks to lead his people to do good by doing good to them.

A chastened people hear the same requirements from God. He does not change his purpose after disciplining his people. He still expects honesty, justice and compassion. He still hates sin.

V15 Jerusalem and Judah are at the centre of God's purpose "to do good" that will then spread out to include all nations. Note that God's wrath is temporary so he can perform his permanent work of grace and create a people that is good. A reassuring call from God "Do not be afraid".

V16 Justice is not confined to prophetic judgement sermons. Announcements of hope and renewal echo the call for truth, sound judgement, concern for neighbours and honest testimony. Every society, whatever its economic and political situation must strive to encourage these qualities in its citizens. God's people should form the vanguard in the efforts for justice.

V17 Two negative commands – not to plot evil and not to swear falsely. Such behaviour God hates.

V19 Chapter 7 opens with concerns about fasting and their relevance. Such mournful occasions of fasting will be replaced by feasting they will all become joyful and glad occasions, love, truth and peace summarizes God's concern for the social dimensions of life. These are the opposite of things that God hates V17.

V20-21 Perhaps the towns surrounding Jerusalem e.g., Bethel will be caught up in the excitement of what God is doing in Jerusalem and tell others.

V22 The powerful will recognise true power and will come to Jerusalem and seek God's mercy.

V23 "In those days" the future day of salvation. The ratio of "ten" to "one" speaks of a great multitude. Remember at Babel humanity united together against God in judgement. God confused their language and scattered them (Genesis 11: 7 – 8). Here Babel is reversed as all languages and nations seeks God on his terms and join together in the "happy festivals" V19 in Jerusalem. "Take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe" - this custom lays claim to a desired relationship or outcome. This summarizes Zechariah's hope. God will return to dwell among His people. It will turn the nations from enemies to friends. God's promise to Abraham includes blessing for the nations (Genesis 12:3). This is a maor theme of Isaiah 42:1-7 and Zechariah 2:11; 9:7; 14:16-19. It is fulfilled in the coming of Jesus - Acts 11:18; Rev 5:9. True Godliness attracts others to the Lord.