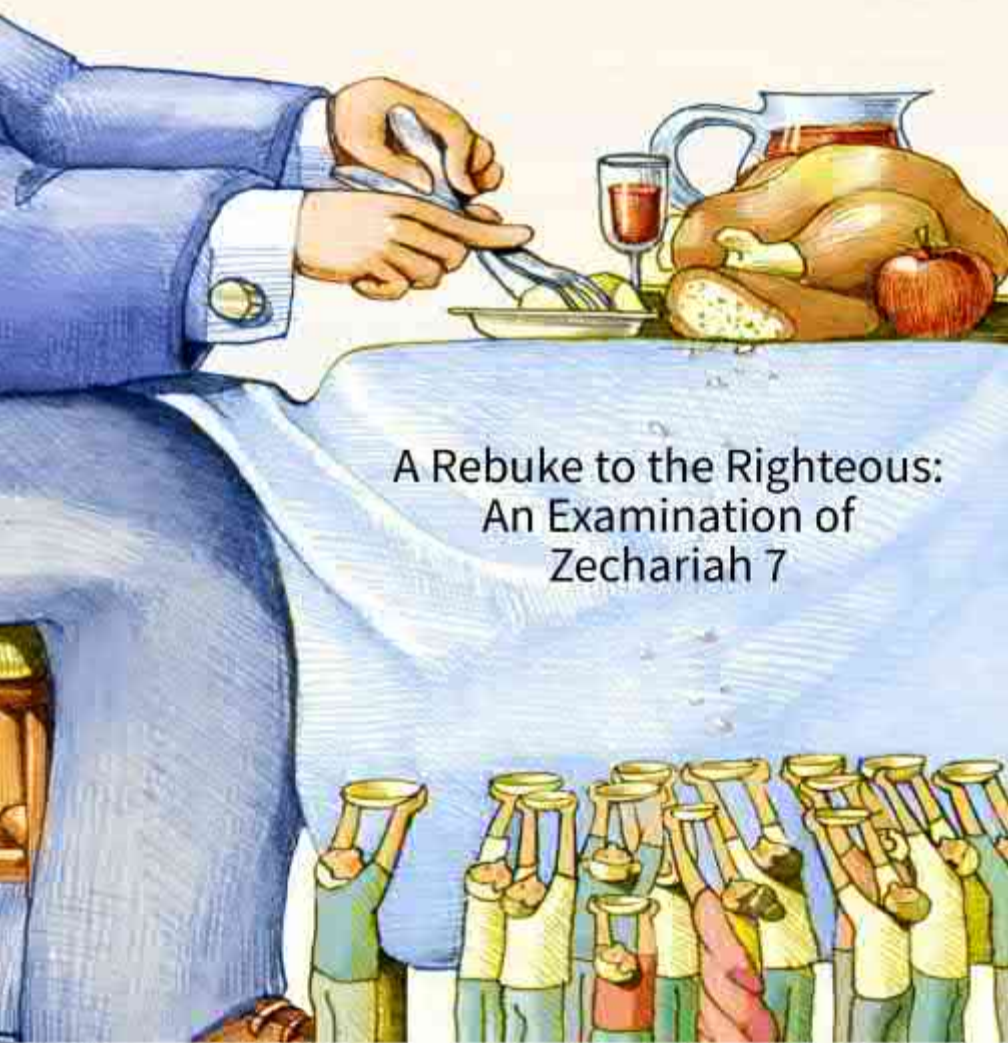


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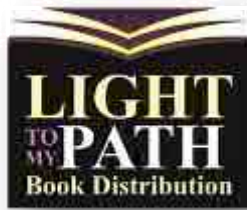
Was It For Me?



A Rebuke to the Righteous:
An Examination of
Zechariah 7

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An Examination of Zechariah 7



F. Wayne MacLeod

Light To My Path Book Distribution
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Preface

Zechariah 7 is the story of how the people of Bethel sent representatives to the temple to seek the favour of the Lord and an answer to a question they had about a special fast day they had observed for seventy years. They came seeking the Lord's blessing and wisdom.

The response of the Lord to these men was not what they expected. Instead of showering them with His blessing, the Lord exposed the selfishness of their faith. He warned them about falling into the same sin as their ancestors who were driven from the land. Through Zechariah, God exposed the hypocrisy of their debate over the celebration of the fast of the fifth month when brothers and sisters in their midst were suffering in poverty and need. The Lord made it clear to these representatives from Bethel that their self-centred religion would not be blessed.

This passage has challenged me to consider my faith. Am I walking in the truth as God intended? Have I become self-centred in my walk with God? Am I so concerned about my desires and traditions that I have overlooked the priorities of God for my life? Is my ministry all about what I want to accomplish for God or am I being sensitive to what He wants me to do? Have I become so wrapped up in insignificant details that I have missed the important things God has for me?

I trust that this passage of Scripture will speak for itself. May the Lord God be pleased to renew this message to

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those who read it today. It is my prayer that the Spirit of God will use Zechariah 7 to speak again to the life of each reader.

God bless,

F. Wayne MacLeod

Chapter 1 - Background and Context

Before we examine the words of the Lord through the prophet Zechariah, it is necessary to understand something of the context and times in which he lived. Verse 1 gives us the date of Zechariah's prophecy:

[7:1] 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.

The Lord spoke the words of Zechariah 7 to the prophet on the fourth day of the month of Chislev in the fourth year of King Darius. The month of Chislev, in the Jewish calendar, corresponds with our months of November and December.

Zechariah prophesied at the same time as Haggai. We understand from Haggai's prophecy that the people who had returned from exile to rebuild the city of Jerusalem were building their homes but neglecting the temple.

[3] Then the word of the LORD came by the hand of Haggai the prophet, [4] "Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your panelled houses, while this house lies in ruins? [5] Now, therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider your ways. [6] You have sown much, and harvested little. You eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill. You clothe yourselves,

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but no one is warm. And he who earns wages does so to put them into a bag with holes. (Haggai 1)

The returned exiles spend their time and money panelling their homes but neglected the work of God. The nation suffered as a result. God removed His blessing from their land because of this neglect. They harvested little. They did not have enough to eat. The clothes they had did not keep them warm.

Zechariah prophesied to a people who had returned from a seventy-year exile. They were building their homes and working their land, but there was a general sense of discouragement among the people. According to Haggai, the reason for this was because they neglected their God and the construction of His temple.

In his opening remarks to the returned exiles, Zechariah challenged them to learn a lesson from their fathers. Writing in the second year of Darius, two years before the words of Zechariah 7, the prophet said:

[1] In the eighth month, in the second year of Darius, the word of the LORD came to the prophet Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, son of Iddo, saying, [2] "The LORD was very angry with your fathers. [3] Therefore say to them, Thus declares the LORD of hosts: Return to me, says the LORD of hosts, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts. [4] Do not be like your fathers, to whom the former prophets cried out, 'Thus says the LORD of hosts, Return from your evil ways and from your evil deeds.' But they did not hear or pay attention to me, declares the LORD. [5] Your fathers, where are they? And the prophets, do they live forever? [6] But my words

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and my statutes, which I commanded my servants the prophets, did they not overtake your fathers? So they repented and said, 'As the LORD of hosts purposed to deal with us for our ways and deeds, so has he dealt with us.'" (Zechariah 1)

Zechariah reminded the Israelites that their ancestors had abandoned the Lord and suffered the consequences. He did not want to see the people of his day repeat the same error. The fact, however, that he spoke these words, shows us that they were likely repeating the sins of their ancestors and wandering from the Lord God.

Zechariah knew that the Lord has something better for His people. The Lord had told him what His desire was for His people in Jerusalem:

[14] So the angel who talked with me said to me, 'Cry out, Thus says the LORD of hosts: I am exceedingly jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion. [15] And I am exceedingly angry with the nations that are at ease; for while I was angry but a little, they furthered the disaster. [16] Therefore, thus says the LORD, I have returned to Jerusalem with mercy; my house shall be built in it, declares the LORD of hosts, and the measuring line shall be stretched out over Jerusalem. (Zechariah 1)

God was exceedingly jealous for Jerusalem and wanted to return to them with mercy and compassion. It was His will that the temple be rebuilt and the people rejoice once again in His name as they responded to His blessings in their midst.

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Israel's return from captivity was only the beginning of what God wanted for His people. His heart overflowed with jealousy for them. His purpose was to bless them beyond measure and fill them with praise for His name. This is not what they were experiencing at the time. They had homes, clothing, freedom and finances, but they had no real contentment and joy in life. After 70 years of captivity in Babylon, they had looked forward to the day when they could the freedom and prosperity of their land. Now that they experienced the "good life," however, they were disappointed.

The picture before us is a powerful one. God released His people from bondage so they could enjoy the blessings of freedom, but the world and its influences stand in the way. The freedom they experience is not what they expected. They are disappointed with their lives. How many believers experience the same reality in their lives today? They have been freed from bondage only to find themselves trapped again in the futility of a worldly lifestyle.

This world will never satisfy the soul. Haggai and Zechariah spoke forcefully to the people of their day reminding them that only when they got right with God and walked in His priorities would they know the fullness and delight that God had in store for them.

For Consideration:

How would you describe the spiritual condition in the land of Israel in the days of Haggai and Zechariah?

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What evidence was there in your society of a lack of blessing from God?

Consider the delight of the exiles who returned from Babylon after seventy years of captivity. What do you think they expected as they returned as free people to their land? Did this new-found freedom bring the satisfaction they expected?

According to Haggai and Zechariah, what kept the returned exiles from experiencing the fullness of delight and satisfaction?

For Prayer:

What attraction is there to the world and its possessions? Do you ever feel this attraction? Ask God to give you His priorities in life.

Ask the Lord to help you to put Him first. Thank Him that when we have His priorities, we can experience the fullness of His purpose.

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Pray that God would keep you from being so focused on your earthly comfort that you fail to see His higher plan for your life.

Chapter 2 - Entreating the Favour of the Lord

[2] Now the people of Bethel had sent Sharezer and Rege-melech and their men to entreat the favour of the Lord. (Zechariah 7)

In the last chapter, we examined the spiritual climate in the nation of Israel at the time of Zechariah the prophet. There was a general awareness among the people that the fullness of God's blessing was not on them. Haggai best describes this in Haggai 1:2-6, quoted in the last chapter. There he described a people who sowed seed but harvested little. They ate and drank but never seemed to be filled. They earned wages, but those wages quickly disappeared.

Notice what takes place in Zechariah 7:2. The people of Bethel sent their men to seek the favour of the Lord. Let's pause for a moment and consider this. This verse tells us something about the people of Bethel.

The people of Bethel understood that they needed the favour of the Lord. This may seem like an insignificant point, but the reality is that all too often, the people of God are blind to this reality. I have been in churches where it seems like the blessing of God had disappeared, but nobody noticed—they continued as if this barrenness was typical.

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The people of Bethel not only noticed that they were not walking in the fullness of God's blessing but determined in their hearts to do something about it—they sent their men to entreat the favour of God. They were not content to accept circumstances the way they were. They made up their mind to inquire of the Lord about this.

The word “entreat” has a very particular meaning in the Hebrew language. The Hebrew-Aramaic Dictionary of the King James Version defines the word as follows:

2470. הָלַךְ *hālāh*, *khaw-law'*;

A primitive root (compare 2342, 2470, 2490); properly to be rubbed or worn; hence (figuratively) to be weak, sick, afflicted; or (causatively) to grieve, make sick; also to stroke (in flattering), entreat.

--beseech, (be) diseased, (put to) grief, be grieved, (be) grievous, infirmity, intreat, lay to, put to pain, X pray, make prayer, be (fall, make) sick, sore, be sorry, make suit (X supplication), woman in travail, be (become) weak, be wounded. (Electronic files Copyright © 2015 by Laridian, Inc. All Rights Reserved.)

The idea is that Sharezer, Rege-meleh and the men with them come before the Lord as those who were worn out, sick and grieved. They came to implore God to have mercy on them and restore His blessings. They knew God was the source of all blessing, and they came to petition Him for the release of that blessing on their lives.

It would be easy to assume that because the people of Zechariah's day were “entreating” the Lord that they were a godly people. There is a world of difference, however,

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between being godly and seeking the favour of God. Many want the favour of God in their lives who have no desire to follow Him. The people of Jesus' day followed Him wherever He went seeking a miracle, but when He went to the cross, their voices could be heard among those who cried out for His crucifixion.

Several years ago, I was in Haiti. It seemed that wherever I went, I saw tremendous needs. People came to me, begging for money or something to eat. All of them had legitimate demands. These people did not know me, however. They came as strangers entreating my favour and asking for a blessing. They left as strangers I would never meet again.

We dare not assume that just because someone is seeking the blessing of God, that they have a relationship with Him. Both Haggai and Zechariah had to rebuke those who were seeking the favour of the Lord because they had been neglecting the temple and its construction. They wanted the favour of God but were unwilling to sacrifice their time and effort for Him.

The faith of many Christians in our day is all about receiving from God. We come with our needs and desires and petition God for them. We accept Jesus for what we can get out of Him. We look for churches that will minister to our needs and wants. If we don't like the music in our church, we leave and go to another that will give us what we want. We complain if the pastor does not visit us enough or if the people don't show us adequate care. I have been in churches where people get upset if the worship service goes a few minutes longer than it should. We want a God who cares for us and our needs. We want

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God to heal us, bless us and minister to our every need. We want preachers who will entertain us and make us feel good about ourselves.

Sometimes our faith is all about “entreating the favour of the Lord.” We want God to give us more and more. We want His blessing on our lives but are not so willing to sacrifice our all for Him. Some preach a gospel of prosperity. They tell people that if they accept Jesus, He will give them all they ask.

We all need the favour of God. Our God is a merciful and compassionate God who is more than willing to pour out that favour upon us. The problem, however, is that this blessing can mean more to us than God. It is not God we want but what He gives. We want a comfortable life. We want the benefits but are not willing to surrender body, soul and mind to the Giver of all blessing.

Jesus told a parable about a sower who went out to sow seed. Some of the seed fell on rocky ground. The seed sprouted and grew, but when the sun came, it wilted and died. The reason it died was that it did not have a root structure that could support it. It was not firmly grounded in good soil.

Like the stones in the rocky ground, our earthly blessings keep our roots from going deeper into the soil. The roots of their commitment to Christ wrap themselves around these blessings but do not draw nourishment from them. Their blessings cannot sustain them. When these blessings are removed, they perish or fall away. They are not firmly grounded in the truth and love of Christ.

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Sharezer, Rege-melech and the men of Bethel came imploring the favour of the Lord for their people. To all outward appearance, they seemed to be a righteous people, but the temple of God remained uncompleted. The question we need to ask ourselves is this: Are we seekers of God or seekers of His favour and blessing only?

Let me conclude this chapter with the words of Habakkuk the prophet:

*[17] Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, [18] yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation.
(Habakkuk 3)*

Is your heart devoted to the Lord God in such a way that even though there are no blessings on the vine or fig tree, you will rejoice in Him?

For Consideration:

Is it possible for us to be blinded to the fact that we are not experiencing the fullness of God's blessing in our lives? How important it is for us to strive to experience the fullness of His favour?

Can we make the blessings of God more important than God Himself? Explain.

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What is the difference between being godly and merely seeking the blessing and favour of God in our lives?

Can a faith that is based on blessings only sustain us?

For Prayer:

Ask the Lord to open your eyes to the need of His favour and blessing in all that you do. Thank Him that He delights to grant us His favour.

Ask the Lord to keep your eyes fixed on Him. Ask Him to keep you from desiring blessing more than His presence.

Take a moment to surrender all you have to the Lord. Tell Him that even if takes it all from you, you will still worship and honour Him.

Chapter 3 - A Question for 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)*

In the last chapter, we saw how the people of Bethel sent Sharezer, Rege-melech and their men to seek the favour of the Lord. These representatives went to the house of the Lord and sought an audience with the priests and prophets. They had a question for their religious leaders:

"Should I weep and abstain in the fifth month, as I have done for so many years" (verse 7)

Let's take a moment to consider this question. Notice first the reference to the fifth month. What was the significance of the fifth month of the Jewish calendar? The answer is found in 2 Kings 25 and Jeremiah 52:

[8] In the fifth month, on the seventh day of the month—that was the nineteenth year of King Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon—Nebuzaradan, the captain of the bodyguard, a servant of the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem. [9] And he burned the house of the LORD and the king's house and all the houses of Jerusalem; every great house he burned down. [10] And all the army of the Chaldeans, who were with the captain of the guard, broke down the walls around Jerusalem. (2 Kings 25)

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[12] In the fifth month, on the tenth day of the month—that was the nineteenth year of King Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon—Nebuzaradan the captain of the bodyguard, who served the king of Babylon, entered Jerusalem. [13] And he burned the house of the LORD, and the king's house and all the houses of Jerusalem; every great house he burned down. (Jeremiah 52)

It was in the fifth month that the Babylonians, under King Nebuchadnezzar, broke into Jerusalem and burned down the city and temple. The great city of Jerusalem was destroyed, and God's people were sent into exile. As you can imagine, this was a significant event in the history of the nation. The Israelites determined to set this day aside as a day of remembrance. It was a day for grief, fasting and abstinence from worldly pleasures.

As the men of Bethel stood before the prophets and priests that day, circumstances had changed. They were no longer in exile. They had returned to their homeland and were rebuilding the ruins of Jerusalem. Homes destroyed seventy years ago were being rebuilt. The temple was rising from the dust. These were days of joy and happiness for the people of God. The question these men ask related to whether they were to continue to grieve for the past or rejoice in their future.

The practice of grieving on the fifth month had, at this time, become a well-established tradition. For seventy years, the people of God set this day aside as a special day of remembrance. The majority of those who returned from exile had observed this tradition all their lives. For the very first time, the people of God were questioning this tradition.

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Sometimes our traditions become so entrenched that we don't question their practice. We can elevate these observances to the height of the Scriptures themselves. Many of our traditions are of human origin, and while they are intended to bring harmony to the church, they are not beyond questioning. This is what we see in Zechariah 7:3. The people of God bring their day of mourning to the Lord to understand if they should continue its observation.

Notice the nature of the question here: "Should I weep and abstain?" What happens when your heart is broken? Don't the tears flow uncontrollably? Those who grieve from their heart lose their appetite for food and pleasures. The question of whether the nation should weep and abstain from food and pleasures is somewhat strange. It seems to imply that this grief had to be manufactured in their hearts for that day. Many years had past and circumstances had changed. The majority of those who celebrated this tradition had never seen the city of Jerusalem –they struggled to grieve for something they never knew.

As these men of Bethel stood before the priests and prophets, they were experiencing the rebirth of Jerusalem. The Lord God had freed them from the bondage of Babylon, and there was hope and joy in the air. Considering the great things that God was doing, the question on their heart was whether they should continue to grieve the past defeat or look forward to the victory before them.

There is a time for us to grieve the past, but there is also a time for us to forget the past and move on into the purpose of God for the future. Listen to what the apostle Paul told the Philippians:

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[13] Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, [14] I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. [15] Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. (Philippians 3)

The apostle Paul encouraged believers in Philippi to forget what was behind them and strain toward what was ahead. This is not to say that we should not remember the lessons God has taught us or the blessings of the past. I have met believers, however, who have been hurt like the Jews at the loss of their city. These believers have lost a loved one, or they have been abused or injured by a circumstance in their life. This pain seems to blind them to what God has in store for their future. They seem to be locked in the past and unable to move forward in God's great purpose for their lives.

The question these men ask in Zechariah 7:3 is an important one. Should we continue to grieve when the presence of God is moving in our midst? Shall we continue to remember our failure and defeat when God is rebuilding the ruins and doing a new thing?

Zechariah 3:7 speaks to several issues in our walk with the Lord. First, it calls us to examine our traditions and reminds us that they are not beyond question. In fact, like the men who approached the prophets and priests in that day, it would do us all good to examine the traditions that have been passed on to us to see whether they have taken the place of God's Word in our churches and personal lives.

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The second challenge of this verse has to do with the sincerity of our worship. The people of that day wondered if they were to weep for the destruction of Jerusalem. The fact that they had to ask this question shows that their hearts were not naturally moved to grieve. They went through the motions, but their heart was not involved.

Finally, the verse encourages us to examine whether we have been chained in the pain of the past. Have we been blinded to the present blessings of God because we cannot move past our defeats? Can we accept the forgiveness of God for our failures and reach out for His blessings? Can we trust God's purpose in our losses and move forward into the greater fullness He has in store?

For Consideration:

What are some of your church's traditions? Do you have any personal traditions? What is the origin of those traditions? How meaningful are they for you today?

What moves your heart? Do you find your heart cold or luke-warm to the things of the Lord?

Do you have pains or hurts you have not been able to overcome? How have these things kept you from moving forward into greater victory in the Lord?

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For Prayer:

Ask the Lord to give you a heart that is sincere and genuinely devoted to Him. Ask Him to remove all pretence and hypocrisy from your life.

Take a moment to thank the Lord for the lessons He has taught you through the things you have endured in life. Ask Him to help you to learn the lessons He has for you in those circumstances.

Ask the Lord to help you to move forward in His purpose for your life. Thank Him for the blessings and victories that lay before you.

Chapter 4 - A Question From the Lord

[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?' (Zechariah 7)

In verse 3, the men who had arrived at the house of the Lord from Bethel asked the prophets and priests if they should celebrate the fifth month in commemoration of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. Zechariah, the prophet was present that day. It was to him that an answer from the Lord came (verse 4). The Lord responded in the form of a question:

"When you fasted and mourned in the fifth month and in the seventh, for these seventy years, was it for me that you fasted?" (Zechariah 7)

Notice that the Lord asked a question not only about the fifth month but the seventh month as well. To understand what happened in the seventh month, we need to examine 2 Kings 25. In this passage, we read the story of what took place when Babylon invaded Jerusalem. In 2 Kings 25:8-10 we read that on the fifth month of the Jewish calendar, Babylon came into the city and burned it down. At that time, they took captives to Babylon, leaving only the poor and unskilled to fend for themselves.

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The Babylonians appointed Gedaliah as governor over those who remained in Jerusalem (2 Kings 25:22). In the seventh month of the Jewish calendar, however, Ishmael, the son of Nethaniah, rebelled against the Babylonians and with ten followers came to Jerusalem and assassinated Gedaliah. The result was that the people who remained in the city feared for their lives. They knew the cruelty of the Babylonians and were afraid of what would happen to them as a result of Ishmael's rebellion. They chose to abandon the city and go to Egypt, trusting in the support of Pharaoh rather than God.

[26] Then all the people, both small and great, and the captains of the forces arose and went to Egypt, for they were afraid of the Chaldeans. (2 Kings 25:26)

Jerusalem was completely abandoned. The Jews in exile chose to remember this day every year by fasting, grieving and abstaining from earthly pleasures. According to Zechariah 7:5, they observed this for seventy years.

In Zechariah 7, the Lord recognized their observation of these days but asked the men present if their fasting on those days was really for him. "Was it for me that you fasted?" He asked (verse 5).

I imagine there would have been some shocked looks on the faces of the people present in the temple that day. The question, however, was a significant one. Religious observances are not always for God. The exiles fasted on the fifth and seventh month for seventy years, but now they discovered that in the eyes of God, they were not fasting for Him.

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Why did God's people fast if it was not for God? They fasted in remembrance of their loss. Their focus in those days of fasting was on the destruction and theft of their property, homes, temple. They grieved over their bondage in a strange land. They had fooled themselves into thinking that this was for God, but it was only for themselves.

Listen to the words of the people of God in Isaiah 58:

*[3] 'Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?'
(Isaiah 58)*

The answer to this question comes back:

[3] ...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. (Isaiah 58)

The reason the Lord did not see their fasting was because they did not fast for Him but their pleasure. "Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high," the Lord told them (verse 4).

There is a world of difference between doing something for ourselves and our pleasure and doing something for God. The most religious of all groups in the New Testament were the Pharisees. Jesus had much to say about this group. Listen to His warning in Matthew 23:

*[23:1] Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples,
[2] "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, [3]
so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the*

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works they do. For they preach but do not practice. [4] They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. [5] They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, [6] and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues [7] and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others. (Matthew 23)

Jesus told his listeners that the Pharisees did “all their deeds to be seen by others.” They used the name of God and taught the law of God, but they did not do it for God but themselves. They wanted people to see and honour them. They served in a religious position so people would notice them. There will be no recognition in heaven of Christian service done with such selfish motivation:

[6:1] “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 6)

Speaking to those who fasted, Jesus said:

[16] “And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. (Matthew 6)

Jesus addressed a people who let other people know they were fasting. They did this in a very subtle way. They “disfigured their faces.” The idea here is that they exaggerated their weakness and hunger, so others would

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come to understand that they were fasting and recognize their devotion to God. In other words, they wanted people to see them and think highly of them.

Listen to the instructions of Jesus about giving:

[2] "Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. [3] But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, [4] so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (Matthew 6)

In these verses, Jesus warns about giving in such a way that the giver receives the praise and not the Lord. The idea is that you give a gift so that people will notice you and your generosity. The donation is given in the name of the Lord but intended to give the donor recognition. According to Matthew 6, there is no heavenly recognition of offerings given with this attitude. The reward for such gifts is earthly praise and attention, but God offers no reward for these selfish offerings.

The Lord rebuked the people of Ezekiel's day because they heard the word of the prophets but did nothing about it.

[31] And they come to you as people come, and they sit before you as my people, and they hear what you say but they will not do it; for with lustful talk in their mouths they act; their heart is set on their gain. [32] And behold, you are to them like one who sings lustful songs with a

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beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument, for they hear what you say, but they will not do it. (Ezekiel 33)

God compared His people in these verses to those who listen to a beautiful song. They hear the words and are entertained by them, but do not consider the message. Could this describe some churches of our day? People come to be entertained by the message and songs but have no real desire to hear the hard words of the Lord or change their ways. The prophet Micah describes the people of his day in Micah 2:

[11] If a man should go about and utter wind and lies, saying, "I will preach to you of wine and strong drink," he would be the preacher for this people! (Micah 2)

Micah speaks of a people who gathered around the prophet who encouraged the drinking of wine and strong drink. These prophets spoke what people wanted to hear. The apostle Paul told Timothy that a day was coming when people would reject sound teaching and listen instead to teachers who suited their passions:

[3] For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, [4] and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. (2 Timothy)

According to Paul, people will gather in the name of Christ with no desire for Him or His purpose in their lives. They will come to be entertained and flattered. They come not to hear His purpose but to be reinforced in their own desires and goals in life.

A Question from the Lord

Is it possible for us to go through the motions of religious worship and service but not be doing so for the Lord? We can pray and ask God only for what we want. We can give to be noticed or to support our vision. We can sing to be entertained and listen to be confirmed in our ambitions in life. We can preach to be honoured and respected by those who hear us. We can evangelize to build up a following for ourselves. None of this is for the Lord. It is all about us and our interests and desires.

As the men of Bethel stood before Zechariah that day, they were likely shocked by what he had to say. They believed that when they fasted and abstained from earthly pleasures on the fifth and seventh month, they were doing so for the Lord. This is why they came to the prophets and priests. The Lord told them that day that these celebrations were of their invention and for themselves.

These two verses challenge us to ask the question, “Am I serving the Lord, or am I serving myself?” They call us to examine our motivations in worship. How tragic it would be to stand before God on the Day of Judgement and hear those four words: “Was it for me?”

For Consideration:

What was the focus of the exiles on the fasting on the fifth and seventh month? How could this have been more about God?

Was It For Me?

Have you ever been guilty of serving or saying something with others to be noticed? What was the motivation behind this?

Can we be guilty of taking the glory due to God for ourselves?

Take a moment to consider your spiritual service and worship? Is this for the Lord or your recognition?

For Prayer:

Ask the Lord to show you if you have any selfish motivations in ministry and worship. Ask Him to humble you and give you a heart for Him alone.

Ask God to give to help you to make Him the focus of your worship and service. Ask Him to teach you to seek His glory above all things.

Ask God to break any pride or self-centeredness in your life. Ask Him to renew your passion for Him and his purpose for your life.

A Question from the Lord

Ask God to forgive you for making your faith about your desires, your understanding of truth and your passions. Ask Him to give you a faith that looks only to Him.

Chapter 5 - Another Question from the Lord

[6] And when you eat and drink, do you not eat for yourselves and drink for yourselves?

In verse 5, the Lord questioned the men who came to Him about the reason for their fasting and abstaining from pleasures on the fifth and seventh month. He told them that what they were doing on those days was not for Him.

The problem with the fasting that took place on those days was that the people were focused on the loss and not on the sin that caused the loss. They grieved because their city was in ruins, but they did not grieve because they had wandered from the Lord and broke fellowship with Him.

In verse 6, the Lord takes this a step further. He asked a second question to those who had come to seek His favour: "When you eat and drink, do you not eat for yourselves and drink for yourselves?"

The reference to eating and drinking may refer to more joyous religious celebrations they practiced throughout the year. It may also refer to any time they were not fasting and abstaining from worldly pleasures. The question is posed in such a way that it does not need an answer. Just as God's people fasted and abstained for their selfish reasons, so they also ate and drank for the same reason. Whether they fasted or feasted, they did so for themselves and not for God.

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Here before us, we have a picture of a group of men gathered in the temple courtyard to seek the will and favour of the Lord. They come with honourable intentions, but when the Lord spoke, He exposed them as selfish sinners. Their understanding of reality clashed sharply with God's. From God's perspective, they were not serving Him at all. Everything they did was for their selfish purposes. We can only imagine the shock this must have been to those men.

Let me take a moment here to focus on the words of the Lord through Zechariah to the men present that day. Consider the words of the apostle Paul to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 10:

[31] So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. (1 Corinthians 10)

The apostle told the Corinthians that they were to do everything for the glory of God. As His representatives on earth, every action and word they spoke was to honour their Creator and Lord. Their faith was not to be restricted to their Sunday worship but touch every aspect of their lives.

Paul would say the same thing to the Colossians:

[17] And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Colossians 3)

Notice that the apostle told the Colossians that every word spoken and every deed done was to be in the name of the Lord Jesus. In other words, they were to be conscious of the fact that they represented Jesus Christ in how they

Another Question from the Lord

spoke and acted in life. Every word was to reflect the character of Christ. Every deed was to demonstrate His attributes. Nothing was to be spoken or done without this being of primary concern.

Paul went even further in Colossians 3:17 to say that in everything we do, we are to give thanks to the Father through Jesus Christ. We are to recognize God as the Giver of all blessings. We are to acknowledge His enabling in all things. Our hearts are to be filled with gratitude and praise to God for every gift.

The apostle Peter wrote:

[11] whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1 Peter 4)

The believer is not to speak and act on his or her own. Peter tells us that there is an intimate connection between the Lord God and the believer's words and actions. Not only are we to speak and act for the glory of God, but according to the apostle, we are to talk and work with the strength and wisdom given to us by the Spirit of the Lord. Those who preach are to speak the oracles of God. Those who serve are to do so in the power of the Lord. There is no room in these words for us to speak our ideas or minister in our strength. The believer speaks and serves in God's name. They minister as God leads and enables. All this is done so that God receives glory.

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The life that pleases God is a life that is wholly dedicated to His glory. It is a self-sacrificing life that is always mindful of God and how to bring Him praise. This attitude affects every aspect of life. What we eat or even whether we eat is determined by what will bring God glory. The desire in what we do is to bring Him honour. More than this, however, the true worshipper is one in whom the very words of God dwell. The enabling power of God is what drives the believer to service. His leading and direction moves the Christian to speak and act for His glory.

The men who sat before Zechariah and the other prophets and priests that day knew very little about this king of faith. Their religion was more concerned about what they wanted than the glory of God. They went through the motions but knew very little of the empowering and enabling of God. God was not part of their every word and deed.

When God rebuked the men, who came to seek His favour, He revealed their shallowness. They came because they wanted more blessing. They wanted what God could give them, but they did not want God. Their hearts were not sold out to God. They were not devoted to His glory alone.

One day a rich young ruler came to Jesus to ask what he could do to have eternal life. Jesus told him that he was to sell all he had, give it to the poor, and then follow Him. Matthew 19 tells us what his response was:

[22] When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. (Matthew 19)

Another Question from the Lord

The young man wanted eternal life but not at the expense of his wealth. He was not willing to heed the command of Jesus to sell everything and give it away. This was too great a sacrifice. He would follow the Lord if He were going to get something for himself, but he would not give up what he had. Like the men standing in the temple in Zechariah's day, their life and faith consisted and eating and drinking for themselves.

For Consideration:

What do you suppose it felt like for the men of Bethel to hear from God that day? Is it possible that we are not all we think we are?

Have you ever been guilty of speaking or acting in ways that did not please God or bring Him honour? Explain.

Can you give thanks to God in everything you do?

Are you aware of the power and anointing of God in what you say and do or are you acting on your own?

Are you guilty of coming to God for greater blessing while unwilling to sacrifice anything for Him?

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Can any of us say that we are living a life that seeks the glory of God alone?

For Prayer:

Ask God to give you a realistic understanding of your relationship with Him. Ask Him to help you to accept your failures. Confess those failures to Him.

Ask God to help you to be more conscious of His presence in your life. Ask Him to help you to do everything with His glory in mind.

Thank the Lord that worshiping Him is not just something we do at church but in every action and word we speak.

Take a moment now to surrender yourself to God. Ask Him to teach you to live only for Him and His glory. Ask Him to give you the grace to surrender yourself, your plans and ideas to Him.

Chapter 6 - Priorities

Having questioned the sincerity of their fasting on the fifth and seventh month, the Lord asked yet another question in verse 7.

[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?"

Notice the phrase: *"Were not these the words that the LORD proclaimed by the former prophets."* To what words is the Lord referring here? The remainder of the chapter provides the answer. In verses 8-14 the Lord takes His people back to a time *"when Jerusalem was inhabited and prosperous, with her cities around her, and the South and the lowland were inhabited"* (verse 7).

At that time, the LORD had spoken to His people challenging them to:

- 1) Render true judgments (Zechariah 7:9)
- 2) Show compassion and mercy (Zechariah 7:9)
- 3) Not oppress the widow, fatherless, sojourner or poor (Zechariah 7:10)
- 4) Not devise evil against one another (Zechariah 7:10)

The people living in the city of Jerusalem before the exile had heard these words did not listen to them. Verse 11

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tells us that they “turned a stubborn shoulder and stopped their ears.” The result was that the anger of the Lord was unleashed (Zechariah 7:12), and they were scattered and left desolate (Zechariah 7:14).

Zechariah challenged the returned exiles not to be like their fathers:

[4] Do not be like your fathers, to whom the former prophets cried out, ‘Thus says the LORD of hosts, Return from your evil ways and from your evil deeds.’ But they did not hear or pay attention to me, declares the LORD. [5] Your fathers, where are they? And the prophets, do they live forever? [6] But my words and my statutes, which I commanded my servants the prophets, did they not overtake your fathers? So they repented and said, ‘As the LORD of hosts purposed to deal with us for our ways and deeds, so has he dealt with us.’” (Zechariah 1)

As the men of Bethel stood before the prophets and priests in the temple, they heard these words of the Lord through Zechariah. The Lord reminded them of how their ancestors had enjoyed great blessing in the city, but because they refused to listen to the word of the Lord, they were punished and sent into exile. What was the implication of these words to the men present that day?

The men of Bethel came to the temple seeking the favour of the Lord. God reminded them of the words He had spoken through the prophets of old. Jamieson, Fausset and Brown have this to say about verse 7:

The sense is, it is not fasts that Jehovah requires of you, but that ye should keep His precepts given to you at the

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time when Jerusalem was in its integrity. Had ye done so then, ye would have had no occasion to institute fasts to commemorate its destruction, for it would never have been destroyed (Zech. 7:9-14) [Maurer]. Or, as the Margin, "Are not these the words" of the older prophets (Isa 58:3; Je 14:12) which threatened a curse for disobedience, which the event has so awfully confirmed. If ye follow them in sin, ye must follow them in suffering. (Robert Jamieson, A.R. Fausset, and David Brown: Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible, 1871, L A R I D I A N)

I believe Jamieson, Fausset and Brown are right. The men of Bethel came asking about fasting and religious observances. God was more interested in obedience than all their spiritual practices. He was also telling them that blessing came through obedience to His Word and walking in His purpose.

In 1 Samuel 15, God called King Saul to take up arms against the Amalekites. As Saul went into battle, the word of the Lord was quite clear:

[3] Now go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.” (1 Samuel 15)

Saul was to destroy the Amalekites. God commanded him to kill every person and animal in the city.

As the battle ensued, Saul overcame the Amalekites. Instead of listening to the Lord's command, however, he spared the life of their king (1 Samuel 15:8). He also kept

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the best sheep, oxen, calves and lambs (1 Samuel 15:9). When questioned by the prophet Samuel about this disobedience, Saul told the prophet that he had kept these animals to sacrifice to the Lord (1 Samuel 15:15). Listen to Samuel's response to King Saul that day:

[22] And Samuel said, "Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams. (1 Samuel 15)

The Lord spoke a similar word to the men of Bethel in the temple that day. They came talking about fasts and celebrations, but God was asking for obedience more than all their sacrifices and religious observances.

The Pharisees were probably the most religious of all groups in the New Testament. Listen, however, to the words of Jesus in Matthew 23:

[23] "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. (Matthew 23)

Jesus knew that the Pharisees religiously tithed. They gave a tenth of the smallest seeds from their garden to the Lord. They were strict observers of the letter of the law but neglected "weightier matters" such as justice, mercy and faithfulness.

What does this have to do with Zechariah 7:7? The men of Bethel came to the temple to ask about fasting. God told them that there were weightier matters they needed to

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address in their lives. They were becoming so focused on their religious practices that they were not seeing that God had called them also to render accurate judgement, (verse 9), show compassion and mercy, (verse 9), cease from oppressing the widow, orphan, needy and foreigner (verse 10), and stop devising evil against each other (verse 10).

How easy it is to be side-tracked in our spiritual life. Maybe you have met people who are regular church attenders but live immoral lives. I have known believers who are very concerned about truth and correct doctrine. These people, however, do not demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit in their lives. Some of them are angry and bitter individuals who will condemn anyone who does not see the truth precisely as they see it. We can share the Gospel of grace but fail to see our unwillingness to forgive a brother or sister. We can preach every week in our church and not see our pride and self-centeredness. God had a word to say to those who came to the temple that day— “you come asking about fasts and celebrations but fail to see that you are not living in obedience and victory over your sins.”

One of the tactics of Satan is to get us to focus so much on the externals that we fail to see our shortcomings. He will tell us that we better music in our church but blind us to the attitude of our hearts towards those who don't agree. He will show us that we need another evangelism programme and then show the newcomers to our church our bitter and unforgiving heart.

The men of Bethel came asking questions about whether they needed to practice a particular fast. God pointed to the sins of their hearts. They practiced their religion and preached about a God of compassion but refused to

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demonstrate that same compassion in their community and relationship with each other. Ultimately, the problem was not in how they worshipped but in the sin of their hearts. May God give us the grace to see that the problem does not demand so much an external solution as a renewal of our hearts.

For Consideration:

The men of Bethel came to the house of the Lord to ask God about the practice of a particular fast. God challenged them to have a bigger perspective. Is it possible that we can become so focused on our religious tradition that we fail to see our sins?

Take a moment to consider your life. Do you have the balance that God required from His people here in Zechariah 7? Have you become so focused on your religious practice that you have neglected “weightier matters”?

How important is it to demonstrate grace and compassion in the application of the law? How should we respond to those who fall short of God’s standard?

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For Prayer:

Take a moment to ask God to examine your heart to see if there is any offensive way in you. Ask Him for forgiveness and complete victory over that sin.

Ask God to forgive you for the times you because so focused on your beliefs that you had little compassion or tolerance for believers who did not agree with you. Ask Him to give you a greater love for those who differ from you.

Thank the Lord for His grace and mercy. Ask Him to help you to demonstrate that same attitude to those who have fallen short of His standard.

Ask the Lord to give you a greater passion to reach out in His love to those who are in need. Ask Him to heal a broken relationship you may be experiencing right now.

Chapter 7 - God's Answer

The men of Bethel came seeking an answer to a question about the fast of the fifth month. The response they received would not be what they expected. They believed that they were serving the Lord through the celebration of this fast, but God told them that it was not for Him at all.

In verses 7, the Lord went as far as to say that they were falling into the same error as their ancestors who were exiled because of sin. Their parents too were a religious people who observed the feasts and traditions of their faith. Despite their religion, however, they were expelled from their land because they were far from God. This was not what these men of Bethel expected to hear.

I suspect that every one of us would feel the same if God were to speak to us about our faith. The Lord spoke to the priests of Malachi's day and said:

[6] "A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear? says the LORD of hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name. But you say, 'How have we despised your name?' (Malachi 1)

God told the priests of Malachi's day that they were not honouring Him. Note the response of these religious leaders: "How have we despised your name?" They had no concept of what they were doing. They did not realize that they were dishonouring the God they served. From

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their perspective, they were serving God and offering an essential service in His name.

In Malachi 2, speaking to the priests, the Lord said:

[13] And this second thing you do. You cover the LORD's altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand. [14] But you say, "Why does he not?" Because the LORD was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. (Malachi 2)

The priests understood that the blessing of the Lord was no longer on their ministry, but they had no understanding of why. "Why does he not" accept our offerings they asked. God had to remind them of their sin and unfaithfulness to their wives.

More than our religious observances, the Lord is looking for believers who love Him and their neighbour as themselves. Notice what Zechariah goes on to say in Zechariah 7:8-10:

[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)

There are four commands of God in these verses. While it is not the purpose of this study to examine these in detail, I do want to touch briefly on them so we can have a sense

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of God's answer to the men who stood in the house of the Lord that day.

Render True Judgements

God expected that His people show no partiality in the judgement of cases in their courts. The poor were to have the same judgement as the rich. There would be no bribing judges. There would be no favour shown to the influential. Everyone who stood before the judge would receive fair and just treatment. Evil would be punished, and the innocent would be vindicated.

It is the purpose of God that human life is respected. The value of a human being was not found in his or her wealth or influence but in the fact that he or she was created in the image of God. God expects that every human being is treated with equal dignity. Jesus put it this way:

[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.' (Matthew 25)

There is a powerful connection between what we do for the "least of these" and what we do for Christ. We cannot separate how we treat others from how we treat the Lord.

Show Kindness and Mercy

The second command of the Lord was that His people show kindness and mercy. The word "kindness" carries with it the sense of doing good for those in need. Mercy is

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the response of a heart that has been touched by the grief of another. Notice that both mercy and kindness are required here. God wants His people to feel the pain of those who are suffering. He wants that pain to move them in acts of compassion and kindness to relieve the oppression of their brother or sister.

Listen to the words of Proverbs 19:17:

[17] He who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward him for what he has done. (Proverbs 19, NIV)

Once again, there is a connection between our kindness toward a brother or sister and what we do for the Lord.

Do not Oppress the Widow, Fatherless, Foreigner or the Poor

The third command of God is expressed in the negative. Here the Lord commanded His people not to oppress the widow, orphan, foreigner or the poor. In Acts 9, the Lord addressed Saul (who would become the apostle Paul). Saul had been persecuting the church and going from place to place dragging Christians to prison. What is particularly interesting in this context is what the Lord had to say to Saul when he spoke to him for the first time:

[4] And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" (Acts 9)

The Lord Jesus accused Paul of persecuting Him. The reality of the matter was that Jesus had risen from the dead and was now with the Father in heaven. Despite this, the

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passage is quite clear—Paul was persecuting the Lord Jesus. He was doing so by persecuting His followers. When Saul hurt believers in Jesus, He hurt the Lord Himself. Proverbs 14:31 says this:

*[31] Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker,
but he who is generous to the needy honors him.*

What we do to the widow and the orphan we do for the Lord. When we insult or oppress the foreigner or the poor, we insult the Lord, their Maker. If we want to honour the Lord, we must do so by respecting His creation.

Do Not Devise Evil Against One Another

In every generation, there has been a battle to be first. Businesspeople want to make the most money. Pastors want to have the largest church. We do not naturally want to come second to a brother or sister. This leads to competition and sometimes unhealthy attitudes and schemes. The prophet Micah spoke of this in the second chapter of his prophecy:

*[2:1] Woe to those who devise wickedness and work evil
on their beds! When the morning dawns, they perform it,
because it is in the power of their hand. [2] They covet
fields and seize them, and houses, and take them away;
they oppress a man and his house, a man and his
inheritance. [3] Therefore thus says the LORD: behold,
against this family I am devising disaster, from which you
cannot remove your necks, and you shall not walk
haughtily, for it will be a time of disaster. (Micah 2:1)*

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The prophet paints a picture of a people who lay on their beds scheming to get ahead of their brother or sister. Notice, however, that the Lord spoke harshly against these people and told them that they would be destroyed for such thinking.

The Lord takes our relationships with others seriously. In fact, in Matthew 5, the Lord Jesus said this to those who came to the temple with an offering:

[23] So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, [24] leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. (Matthew 5)

Notice the connection between our worship of God and our relationship with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Our worship of God is hindered by a broken relationship. Our service to Christ is hampered by a lack of compassion and concern for the poor and needy in our midst. If our hearts are hardened to the pain of those around us so that we withhold blessing, we cannot expect to see the blessing of God in our lives and ministry.

What was the Lord saying to the men who came to Bethel seeking His favour? He was telling them that if they wanted His support, they needed to show His compassion to their brothers and sisters. If they wished to experience His blessing, they needed to bless the lowest in their community. They could not expect God to receive their worship if they offended Him through their lack of concern for the hurts in their community. They grieved His heart by their lack of compassion.

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The writer of Proverbs puts it this way:

[25] Whoever brings blessing will be enriched, and one who waters will himself be watered. (Proverbs 11)

Take a moment to examine your Christian life. Does it illustrate what God is saying to the men of Bethel? Are you so focused on traditions and rituals that you have failed to see the needs around you? Does your light shine brightly in your community? Are you having an impact in this world? Are people being changed because of your example and actions? Does compassion, kindness, mercy have any place in your life? What about your relationship with other people? Do you forgive and love, or are you bitter and unforgiving? The faith that God demanded of His people was much more than a faith of traditions and rituals. It was a faith that touched lives and illustrated the compassion and mercy of God in the world. Though they were religious people, God would hold the people of Bethel accountable for their failure to demonstrate His character to the needy in their lives. They would answer to Him for their religious but hard heart.

For Consideration:

What is the connection between serving the Lord and caring for His people? Can we do one without the other?

What is the pathway to blessing, according to Zechariah 7:8-10?

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Is it possible to have a selfish faith that is concerned only for ourselves and our blessing? How does this passage challenge this attitude?

What is the difference between feeling for someone's grief and acting on it? Is feeling for someone sufficient? Is acting without feeling enough? What does God require? How do kindness and mercy work in harmony?

How has your life been impacting the people of your community or the circle of your influence?

For Prayer:

Ask God to give you eyes to see the needs around you so that you can honour Him by ministering to those needs?

Ask God to give you a heart for your brother and sister in need.

Ask God to forgive you for the blindness of a religion that seeks favour for itself but is reluctant to share that favour with another.

Chapter 8 - The Fruit of a Self-Centred Religion

*[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)*

The Lord was speaking through Zechariah to the men who had come from Bethel to seek His favour. In the last chapter, we saw how God told them that if they wanted to know His blessing, they needed to be a blessing to those around them. They needed to show true justice, kindness and mercy. They would have to minister to the needs of the widow, orphan, foreigner and the poor. They would also have to live in harmony with their brother and sister. As they did this, they honoured their Creator and God and would experience His favour.

The faith God requires is not self-centred. It is a sacrificial and giving relationship that cares for those in need and has an impact on the community. The men who came to the temple that day were seeking favour for themselves. What they failed to understand is that in blessing, they would be blessed and in giving they would receive. Speaking to the Ephesian elders in Act 20, the apostle Paul said this:

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[35] In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" (Acts 20)

Paul challenged these elders to work hard to help the weak. He reminded them that the Lord Jesus had said that it was more "blessed to give than to receive." If we want to know the blessing of God, the best way to do this is to give it away. Consider the example of the Lord Jesus as recorded for us in Philippians 2:

[5] Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, [6] who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, [7] but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. [8] And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. [9] Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, [10] so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, [11] and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2)

The apostle Paul challenged the Philippians to follow the example of Jesus. He reminded them of how Jesus was God but emptied Himself and took on the form of a servant. As a servant, He humbled Himself to the point of laying down His life for His people. The result was that God highly exalted Him and gave Him a name that was above every other name. Through the emptying of Himself, Jesus was exalted and honoured. He lived a sacrificial life devoted to

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the needs of those He came to serve. This resulted in great blessing for us and great glory for Himself. The pathway to blessing is through service and sacrifice.

As we come to Zechariah 7:11-12, we need to see the result of Israel's self-centred religion. Notice that while God had commanded them to minister to the needs of those around them, Israel "refused to pay attention," "turned a stubborn shoulder," and "stopped their ears that they might not hear" (verse 11). This was not the type of faith they wanted. They wanted blessing but did not want to reach out to the poor and needy. They wanted the favour of the Lord, but they did not want to sacrifice their blessings to receive it.

The prophet Amos addressed this when he spoke to the women of his nation in Amos 4:

[4:1] "Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, who are on the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to your husbands, 'Bring, that we may drink!' [2] The Lord GOD has sworn by his holiness that, behold, the days are coming upon you, when they shall take you away with hooks, even the last of you with fishhooks. (Amos 4)

Addressing the women of the nation as the "cows of Bashan," Amos paints a picture of a population who oppressed the poor and crushed the needy. As they lay comfortably on their couches of luxury, these women called out to their husbands: "Bring, that we may drink!" They filled themselves with luxury but cared little for the needy among them. Consider the response of God in Amos 4:2. God told them that the day was coming when

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He would take them away with hooks. In other words, they would be forced to leave their lives of luxury and go into exile. They would become poor and needy. These women who lived for themselves would lose everything. The curse of God would fall on them.

When faith becomes about us, we become hardened to the needs of others. Through Moses, the Lord warned His people about allowing their hearts to become hardened to the needs of the poor in their midst.

[7] "If among you, one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother (Deuteronomy 15)

How do our hearts become hardened to the needs around us? Zechariah has already answered this in Zechariah 7:11. Our hearts become hardened when we refuse to pay attention, turn a stubborn shoulder and stop our ears lest they hear the call of God. Our self-centeredness keeps us from being willing to look to the needs in our community. Our refusal to listen to the gentle prompting of the Lord deafens our ears to His leading. Our hard hearts no longer feel the compassion and mercy of the Lord.

Moses went on in Deuteronomy 15 to challenge his people to give sacrificially to the needy:

[8] but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be... [10] You shall give to him freely, and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him, because for this the

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LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. (Deuteronomy 15)

Notice that the blessing of the Lord on those who gave freely to the needs of the poor among them –“for this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake” (Deuteronomy 15:10).

Note in Zechariah 7:1, the response of the Lord God toward those who refused to bless the needy among them.

*“Therefore great anger came from the LORD of hosts.”
(Zechariah 7:12)*

Not only is there no blessing in a self-centred religion, but this kind of faith angers the Lord. Notice that the anger of the Lord against His people was “great.” The Lord was furious with His people for not blessing the poor. He was outraged that His people refused to share His blessing with others.

In Revelation 18, we read about the judgement of Babylon. Babylon seems to represent the materialistic and pleasure-seeking philosophy of our day. Listen to the Lord’s decree:

[6] Pay her back as she herself has paid back others, and repay her double for her deeds; mix a double portion for her in the cup she mixed. [7] As she glorified herself and lived in luxury, so give her a like measure of torment and mourning, since in her heart she says, ‘I sit as a queen, I am no widow, and mourning I shall never see.’ [8] For this reason her plagues will come in a single day, death and mourning and famine, and she will be burned up with

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*fire; for mighty is the Lord God who has judged her.”
(Revelation 18)*

God was angry with Babylon because she exalted herself and lived in the lap of luxury. In an instant, she would be reduced to poverty. She would mourn, die and be burned with fire. She had elevated herself, saying: “I sit as a queen, I am no widow and mourning I shall never see.” Her life was about meeting her own needs. It was not about anyone but her. God would pay her back double for what she had done to others (verse 6). Her self-centred religion angered the Lord so that He judged her with fire.

What is the fruit of a self-centred faith? Zechariah 7:11-12 tells us that it is a hardened heart, an insensitivity to the leading and the Word of the Lord, and the great anger of God. As the men of Bethel stood before the Lord that day, He rebuked their city. He called them to remember that a faith that does not reach out in His name to the needs of their community was a faith that angered God.

We reach out in many different ways, but we can be sure of one thing. Our faith was never intended to be lived in isolation or enclosed in the four walls of a church building. A faith that does not impact our community and world is a faith that displeases God.

For Consideration:

What is a self-centred religion? What are the characteristics of a faith that is more concerned about receiving than giving?

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Jesus told His disciples that it was more blessed to give than to receive. How did He demonstrate this in His life on earth?

Examine your faith? How much of your faith is about receiving from God? How much is about sacrificial living and giving?

How has your Christian life impacted the community in which you live?

For Prayer:

Ask the Lord to open your eyes and ears to the needs around you. Ask Him to give you a more sacrificial heart.

Thank the Lord Jesus for His example of sacrificial love. Ask Him to enable you to be more like Him in your faith?

Chapter 9 - The Pleasant Land Made Desolate

[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."

As Zechariah spoke to the men who had come seeking the favour of the Lord, he expressed the anger of the Lord over Israel's self-centred religion. They had fallen into the sin as their ancestors. God called them to be His instrument of blessing to the poor and needy. He had called them to "render true judgements, show kindness and mercy to one another" (verse 9). He warned them against oppressing the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, and the poor (verse 10). Like their parents before them, however, the returned exiles did not listen to the voice of God.

Zechariah reminded the leaders in the temple that day of what happened to their ancestors when they did not listen.

[13] "As I called, and they would not hear, so they called, and I would not hear." (Zechariah 7)

The message was clear. There could be no blessing from God until they listened to His voice. There could be no favour until they demonstrated mercy toward their brothers and sisters.

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Sometimes we think that God is obligated to listen to our prayers. What we see from this, however, is that prayers can be hindered because of our lack of compassion toward those around us. Jesus told those who brought their gift to the altar and remembered that their brother or sister had something against them to leave their offering at the altar and first be reconciled with their brother (Matthew 5:24).

God told the priests in Malachi 2:13-14 that He no longer regarded their offerings because they had been unfaithful to their wives. Similarly, the apostle Peter challenged husbands to live with their wives in an understanding way so that their prayers would not be hindered.

[7] Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered. (1 Peter 3)

Jesus tells the story of a servant who owed a king a significant amount of money. Wanting to settle his debts, the king demanded payment. When the servant could not pay the debt, the king ordered that he sell his wife and children into slavery to settle the account. The grief-stricken servant begged the king to have pity. Out of compassion for the man, the king forgave his debt.

Leaving the presence of the king, the man went to a fellow servant who owed him money. When his debtor could not pay, he became angry and put him in prison until he paid him what he owed. When the king heard what had happened, he summoned the man he had forgiven and ordered that he be thrown into prison, telling him that he

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should have had mercy on his fellow servant just as he had received mercy. The conclusion to this parable of Jesus is this:

*[35] So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”
(Matthew 18)*

We who have received compassion and forgiveness must forgive those who have offended us. Jesus made it quite clear that if we want forgiveness, we must first forgive those who have hurt us:

[14] For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, [15] but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Matthew 6)

I cannot grow in my relationship with God if I am only concerned for myself. I must forgive if I want to be forgiven. I must demonstrate mercy if I want to experience the mercy of God. I must be reconciled with my brother or sister if I wish my worship of God to be accepted. I must treat others with respect if I want God to hear my prayers.

Notice as we continue our reflection on Zechariah 7:14 the result of Israel's self-centred faith.

[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)

God scattered Israel because she would not listen to her God and the call to demonstrate compassion and mercy to

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one another. She lost her nation because she showed no concern for those around her. Her land was left desolate because she who had been forgiven refused justice to the poor.

There is a strong warning in this verse. No faith can flourish apart from sacrifice. The Christian faith began with the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus on the cross for our sin. It thrives when God's people surrender to Him and devote themselves to the service of their brothers and sisters. It is in the soil of sacrifice that faith grows best.

Zechariah warned the people of his day that desolation and loss would be the future for those whose faith was focused on themselves and their blessing. The men who came seeking the favour of the Lord would not receive it because they were only concerned for themselves. Listen to the words of the apostle James:

[2] You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. [3] You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. (James 4)

James describes a people who desired to have things for themselves. When they came to God asking for His blessing, God did not give it to them because they asked only for themselves to satisfy their selfish passions. This desire was so strong that they coveted, fought, quarrelled and even murdered to obtain what they wanted.

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Jeremiah describes a people who grew fat off the blessings of the Lord but did not defend the rights of the fatherless and needy:

[28] they have grown fat and sleek. They know no bounds in deeds of evil; they judge not with justice the cause of the fatherless, to make it prosper, and they do not defend the rights of the needy. [29] Shall I not punish them for these things? declares the LORD, and shall I not avenge myself on a nation such as this?" (Jeremiah 5)

The faith of God's people in Jeremiah's was not sacrificial. It was a faith that grew fat and lazy on the blessings intended for others. Like a stagnant pool, without an outlet, their faith bred disease and impurity. Through Jeremiah, the prophet, the Lord told the people that he would avenge himself on the nation because of their attitude.

Standing before Zechariah in the temple were representatives of the people who had returned from exile. They came seeking the will of the Lord about a religious celebration. They came seeking the favour of the Lord for their lives and the life of the nation. Outwardly this appeared to be a wonderful thing. The problem, however, was that these people were self-centred and greedy. Their unwillingness to share the blessing of God with the needy kept their prayers from being answered. They came with open hands to receive but closed those hands to anyone else. They were prepared to grow fat on the blessings of God while brothers and sisters perished around them.

If God cannot get His blessings through us to those who need them, why would he continue to give His blessing to us? When we who have been blessed refuse to bless, we

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sin against God. When we keep for ourselves what God has given us for another, we anger God. When our faith is all about our needs and passions and unconcerned about the burdens of our brother or sister, we grieve the heart of a merciful God. True religion grows in the soil of sacrifice. The greatest blessing is experienced in giving. Only in dying to ourselves can we know real joy and satisfaction in God.

Zechariah warns of desolation and loss for all who seek only favour for themselves. In an age of materialism and selfishness, we would do well to heed the warning of Zechariah.

For Consideration:

What is our responsibility toward those in need? How does ignoring this obligation hinder our relationship with God?

Why is it hypocritical to refuse forgiveness and blessing to others?

How much of your prayers are focused on your wants and desires? How much do you cry out for others?

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What kind of impact does your church have on your community? Is it reaching out in the name of Jesus to the needs of your society?

What does Zechariah say about the future of a self-centred faith? Can we expect a blessing if we are not willing to bless?

For Prayer:

Ask God to forgive you for not demonstrating to your brothers and sisters the same love and compassion that you receive in Jesus Christ?

Ask God to give you eyes to see the needs He wants you to see. Ask Him for a heart to be able to respond to those needs in His name.

Do you feel like the blessing of God has been stripped from you? Ask God to give you the opportunity to be a blessing to someone else. Thank Him that there is more blessing in giving than in receiving.

Chapter 10 - Conclusion

Zechariah 7 is the story of a religious people involved in a debate over the celebration of a fast day. It is also the story of a people who wanted to know the favour and blessing of the Lord on their lives. They sent their representatives to the temple of the Lord to find this blessing and the answer to their questions.

When the word of the Lord came, these representatives were rebuked. They saw themselves as religious people who served the Lord, but that was not how God saw them. As they stood before the Lord God, the prophet Zechariah challenged them with the words of the Lord. I suppose they were reminded of how they had been living in panelled houses while the temple of the Lord was in disrepair. God rebuked the men of Israel because, while they were religious, they were thinking only of themselves. Their faith was a self-centred faith that sought favour and blessing for their own lives, but they were unwilling to share that richness with others. They debated whether they needed to celebrate a fast when the poor and needy suffered all around them. They came seeking the blessing of the Lord but would only grow fat and lazy on that blessing.

I have been in meetings where I would go from one person to another and listen to them unfold their pain and struggle. From dying children to life-changing illnesses, people would share their stories with me. Sometimes all they needed was someone to pray with them or show concern. I have also been in meetings where people came with a

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deep agony of soul and left the same because no one seemed to notice. Do we miss opportunities to demonstrate the compassion of Christ because we are so focused on our religious activities?

I remember a church service I was leading many years ago. As I began the service, I noticed a man in the back who seemed agitated and in tears. I stopped what I was doing and spoke directly to him: "Allen, what's wrong?" He replied, "It's my wife. She's depressed, and when she is like this, she gets suicidal." "Come up here to the front," I told Allen. He came to the front of the room. Speaking to the rest of those present, I said: "Allen has a real need here. Let's gather around him and stand with him in this time of need." People came forward and surrounded Allen. Someone had a verse of Scripture to comfort him. Another started to sing the words of a hymn, and others would follow their lead. Someone prayed for him and his wife. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed one lady leave the church. I wasn't sure why she went until I saw out of the window that she got into her car and left the premises. It then struck me what she was doing. She was going to see Allen's wife at her home.

Everything I planned for that service was changed. The message I had prepared to preach seemed inappropriate for the occasion. God gave me another word that day. Our choice of hymns was changed. I like to say that our order of service was interrupted by God. The next week both Allen and his wife were in church feeling much better. I am so glad God interrupted my plan that week. I am happy that God ministered to Allen and his wife. Somehow, I feel that had we continued with what we had planned, we

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would have missed God's purpose for us that afternoon. We can become blind to what God requires because we are so intent to follow our traditions and liturgy.

Has the Christian faith become all about us and our traditions? Have we lost the art of seeing the opportunities God brings to us every day? Historical records indicate that early missionaries packed their belongings in coffins when they went to the mission field.

The early missionaries sent to Africa packed their coffins in the ships that took them to that Continent. The mental image of a missionary packing his or her coffin for their journey speaks volumes about their commitment. They not only accepted the fear of death, they certainly knew it was going to happen to them. Our generation has not needed to send its overseas missionaries out with coffins.

Nowadays they can return more easily for furlough through air travel. Maybe we have lost something of the sacrifice and the potential loss needed to serve God.

("Missionaries and their Coffins,

<http://www.unlockingthegrowth.com/2015/06/missionaries-and-their-coffins/>)

Does our commitment to God end when things become inconvenient or uncomfortable? Has our gospel been reduced to a message of prosperity and blessing only? Do we seek converts who are willing to lay everything down for the Lord, or do we offer them a life of ease and comfort? Are we producing disciples who will risk everything and give everything that Jesus might be known and honoured?

Was this not the problem Jesus experienced in His day? The people who followed Him were interested in the new

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doctrines He taught, and in the healing He offered. When Jesus died, however, only a handful of people remained faithful to His name. Of the thousands that followed Jesus when He was alive, Acts 1:15 tells us that only 120 continued to believe in Him after He died.

Do we rigorously defend and practice the fine points of doctrine and neglect to show mercy toward those who differ from us? Do we stand firmly behind our religious traditions and fail to show compassion to those in need? As the men of Israel stood before the priests and prophets that day, they debated the need to commemorate the fast of the fifth month. While they believed this was an important question, the Lord ultimately refused to answer. Instead, He chose to ask His own questions. Was it for me that you fasted? Didn't you eat and drink for yourselves? Didn't I warn your fathers about rendering right judgement and showing kindness and mercy to the widow, orphan and stranger? Don't I have the right to be angry with you for your failure to obey me?

The words of God rebuked the "righteous" men who came to Him that day. These words challenged their self-centeredness and lack of compassion. He warned them that a selfish faith was a desolate faith.

The Lord does not rebuke these men for seeking His favour. He does rebuke them, however, for not sharing that favour. He does not rebuke them for asking about His will regarding the fast of the fifth month. He does reprimand them, however, for neglecting weightier matters. Instead of becoming channels of His blessing, they had become stagnant pools breeding disease and infection. To be blessed, they needed to be a blessing. To know the favour

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of God, they needed to share that favour. To see God, they needed to shift their attention from themselves.

As I reflect on this passage, I cannot help but see myself among those men present before Zechariah. Like them, I believe I am standing on the truth God as revealed in His Word. I think I am honouring Him in my actions. I long to know His favour and direction in my life. What would He say to me if I stood before Him today? Would my eyes be opened like theirs were that day? Would I see the selfishness of my faith? Would I understand the hardness of my heart? Would I be rebuked in my priorities? Zechariah 7 is a challenge for us. It is not how we see ourselves that matters, but how God sees us. May we have the ears to hear Him and the humility to confess our shortcomings and failures.

For Consideration:

Do you believe that the men of Israel came to the temple in Zechariah 7 with honourable intentions? Explain.

Is it wrong to seek the Lord's favour and wisdom? Why was God angry with those who came seeking this in Zechariah 7?

Consider how we present the gospel to the unbeliever. Do we preach a self-centred message? What does God require of all who come to Him?

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Is it possible that how God sees you is not how you see yourself? Explain.

For Prayer:

Thank the Lord for His favour on your life. Ask Him to help you to offer that same favour to those around you.

Ask God to raise a generation of believers who are willing to sacrifice all for the glory of their Lord.

Ask God to forgive us for making faith all about us, our needs and preferences. Ask Him to give you the grace to die to yourself so that you can be wholly devoted to Him and those in need around you.

Ask Him to give you the humility to see yourself as He sees you.

Light To My Path Book Distribution

Light To My Path (LTMP) is a book writing and distribution ministry reaching out to needy Christian workers in Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Many Christian workers in developing countries do not have the resources necessary to obtain Bible training or purchase Bible study materials for their ministries and personal encouragement. F. Wayne MacLeod is a member of Action International Ministries and has been writing these books with a goal to distribute them to needy pastors and Christian workers around the world.

To date, thousands of books are being used in preaching, teaching, evangelism and encouragement of local believers in over sixty countries. Books have now been translated into a number of languages. The goal is to make them available to as many believers as possible.

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