

Right Religion

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[0 : 00] Zechariah chapter 7, picking up at verse 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 Chislew.

Now the people of Bethel had sent Shariza and Regimelech and their men to entreat the favour of the Lord, 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?

Then the word of the Lord of hosts came to me. Say to all the people of the land and the priests, when you fasted and mourned in the fifth month and in the seventh month for these 70 years, was it for me that you fasted?

And when you eat and when you drink, do you not eat for yourselves and drink for yourselves? 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? And the word of the Lord came to Zechariah saying, Thus says the Lord of hosts, Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another.

[1 : 29] Do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart.

But they refused to pay attention and turned a stubborn shoulder and stopped their ears that they might not hear. They made their hearts diamond hard, lest they should hear the law and the words that the Lord of hosts had sent, by his spirit, through the former prophets.

Therefore, great anger came from the Lord of hosts. As I called, and they would not hear, so they called, and I would not hear, says the Lord of hosts.

And I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations that they had not known. Thus, the land they left was desolate, so that no one went to and fro, and the pleasant land was made desolate. Well, let me say, there's all kinds of situations that cause grief in the world, and cause grief to us as well, isn't there?

[2 : 51] There's all kinds of life circumstances that cause us to mourn and wail. Grief when we lose a loved one, grief when our health fails us, lets us down, grief when our children suffer, grief when we lose a job.

Some people in this room, he'll be grieving this morning. And what you need to know is that God loves you, and that he knows what it is to suffer loss, and to grieve as well.

And one thing is certain, you just need to live long enough, and you will grieve, you will suffer, something hard will come.

Sarah and Hannah, to name a few women in the Old Testament, had great grief. Abraham mourned the loss of his wife, and Job had terrible suffering. Now when Paul wrote to the Corinthians, he actually caused the Corinthians grief.

Right? And their grief was not the kind of grief that come about because of some personal loss, or personal tragedy. But a grief, because he exposed their sin in their lives.

[4 : 02] And it wasn't easy for him to actually cause that grief to the people that he dearly loved. Right? He hurt them in some way, and it was hard for them to hear it when they were confronted with the truth.

But nonetheless, it was appropriate for him to do so. And he told them, in 2 Corinthians chapter 7 verse 10, this is our topic verse for this morning, right?

Godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.

We'll say it again, 2 Corinthians chapter 7 verse 10. Godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.

Now, there are two ways to grieve when sin is exposed. One way is worldly grief. Right? That's one way to respond.

[5 : 09] Now, my thing here is not responding. Here we go. That's the way that most people in the world react when they're being found out for something wrong.

They feel sorry, right, for themselves. They regret being found out. They regret the trouble that they have to pay a fine. They regret the consequences.

They regret the fact that sometimes, well, it leads to jail. I mean, I understand that there's many people in jail who are grieving, they're there, but they still maintain their innocence when they're really guilty.

See, worldly grief leads to death because it doesn't lead to repentance. Regret, yes, repentance, no.

Worldly grief does not take God seriously. Worldly grief despises what God says. But the other way to grieve is the godly grief.

[6 : 13] And that is to see the offence of my sin for what it is. To agree that I'm in the wrong.

To mourn the impact that my sin has on others. To mourn the rebellion and the affront it is to God. But not only just to recognise it, then to repent. To change my mind about the way I used to think and to do a 180 degree turn and go back the other way.

Right? And then that leads to asking God for forgiveness and asking the other person around about me for forgiveness. And God promises that when we ask him to forgive us he generously promises to do that.

So through confession and repentance we then actually find forgiveness and enjoy salvation life and no regrets.

[7 : 27] Right? Now today in Zechariah chapter 7 we see God reveal to Israel the reason that's led to their situation again. Now we've heard their situation happened previously and we're going to hear it again.

They had been told by the prophets in the past to repent as a nation but had failed to do so. And then they have suffered greatly for it and that led to their destruction to their death and exiled to Babylon coming upon them which caused them great great grief yes but no change of heart.

Now in saying that the exile is no small thing right? Think of the pictures we see in Gaza that we get on the TV. Demolition of your land your capital city.

Death and destruction all the way around about you right? Family friends and way of life altered forever destroyed.

The very fabric and the foundation of your society deserted. Something unimaginable right? To me living comfortably here in Brisbane.

[8 : 51] So I can't begin to imagine what the suffering and grief would have actually been like to experience first hand of the exile. It was catastrophically traumatising and in this chapter we see a question and almost almost an answer right?

Which gets us to the heart of the matter. So let's plunge into chapter 7 some more. the question comes in verses 1 to 3 but in the period of time after the first wave of returnees from the Babylonian exile has happened right?

So there's a slide by way of reminder. The first wave of returnees had come home and the major project right? Of rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem under the rubble was underway.

We're in that green Z section there. That's where we're at. And then Zechariah brings God's word to them having received God's word to speak.

Once from visions in the night on October 520 BC we read about that in Zechariah 1 and the first few chapters and now again in December 518 BC that's Zechariah chapter 7 so in the fourth year of King Darius.

[10 : 20] Darius was the king of the vast Persian Empire. We met him in the first verse of the book when the word of the Lord came to Zechariah in the form of eight visions in one night and in the second year of King Darius.

So by way of reminder here's the break up of the book part 1 chapters 1 to 6 part 2 chapters 7 to 14 we're now moving into part 2 of Zechariah it's now two years after the eighth vision right it's the fourth year of King Darius the Persian king the temples will under construction now right it take another two years before it's completed we read about in Ezra chapter 6 tells us that it's completed in the sixth year of Darius Zechariah 7 is in the fourth year of King Darius the Persian and it's the

fourth day of the ninth month in the Jewish calendar the month of Chislew we're in the date December 518 BC BC remember means before Christ Jesus right before King Jesus that's what BC means and the people of Bethel send two people we know little about

Shereza and Regimelech along with their entourage and they come and ask a favour of the Lord verse two they have a question that they would like answered should I that's the question should I that is the people of Bethel altogether weep and abstain in the fifth month as I the people of Bethel have done for so many years right now Bethel is about 20 kilometres north of Jerusalem it's the place where there was all kinds of good things happen and bad things happen in Bethel in the past now does anyone know why they would be weeping and abstaining in the fifth month of the Jewish calendar at all why would they be weeping and wailing and mourning in the fifth month of the Jewish calendar well you don't talk to the person next to you you've got no idea that's okay but we'll find out this morning why would they be weeping and wailing in the fifth month of the Jewish calendar well let me give you a clue

I know there's some very very clever people out there that you know this one and the uni church crowd already know it so that's good right have a look at 2 Kings chapter 25 I think it's on the screen before yeah 2 Kings chapter 25 in the fifth month on the seventh day of the month that was the 19th year of King Nebuchadnezzar now Nebuchadnezzar was the Babylonian king remember the king of Babylon Nebuchadnezzar the captain of the bodyguard a servant of the king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and he burned the house of the Lord and the king's house and all the houses of Jerusalem every great house he burnt down and all the army of the Chaldeans who were with the captain of the guard broke down the walls around Jerusalem and the rest of the people who were in the city and the deserters who had deserted the king of Babylon together with the rest of the multitude Nebuchadnezzar the captain of the guard carried into exile the fifth month was the month when

Babylon destroyed Jerusalem they invaded the joint they destroyed the place they raped and pillaged and wrecked the joint turned into rubble burnt it down destroyed your temple your whole fabric of society gone that would cause you to grieve wouldn't it imagine Brisbane destroyed by massive bomb your suburb burnt to the ground that would cause you to grieve wouldn't it those that were left in Bethel had been weeping and fasting ever since 70 years you can understand why they had this national day of mourning not the same but kind of like we remember Anzac Day you know it was a day to mourn the destruction of their very way of life and now the temple is being rebuilt and the people have returned from exile was it time to stop weeping and fasting now after all things are looking up now they're looking pretty good could you give us an answer

[15:08] Zechariah yes or no should we stop mourning! now God should we stop mourning! now well we get the answer verses 4-7 and the answer is just more questions don't you love it when the preacher does that you ask a question they ask you questions back but listen to what God says he asked them some questions which will expose something that they hadn't considered it'll expose their very hearts see verses 4-5 then the word of the Lord came of hosts came to me say to all the people of the land and the priests when you fasted and mourned in the fifth month and the seventh for these 70 years was it for me that you fasted?

when you fasted and mourned in the fourth month why did you fast? it seems that the people who stayed in the land had set up four fasts all together we read about in chapter 8 all to do with the destruction of Jerusalem that's why they were fasting and verses 6-7 when you eat and when you drink do you not eat for yourselves and drink for yourselves were not these the words that the Lord proclaimed by the former prophets when Jerusalem was inhabited and prospered with her cities around her and the south and the lowland were inhabited so why did you fast and mourn?

why have you been fasting and mourning? why have you been feasting and celebrating at all? what was your mourning all about? and here's the point right here's the point your mourning actually missed the mark you didn't mourn for me your God you mourned for yourselves and your loss only it seems that their feasts and fasts were not kept with God in mind they were not kept as days to be reminded of God's works of both judgment and salvation hear this your fasts were a farce and your feasts were a farce as well bottom line your religious observance was not about

God it was about you but they may have been thinking well we're mourning the loss of the temple the destruction of the land but here's the thing their grief has not been godly grief it's been worldly grief it hadn't led them to repentance right their hearts were far from God they were not fasting and mourning the deeper problem their sin they were not fasting for how they had treated God you were

fasting and mourning Israel because you no longer were a great and powerful nation you were no longer enjoying splendid peace and prosperity in the land you're no longer the regional superpower anymore that you'd once been and don't start to think that your fasting has brought about the restoration of the temple that you're now seeing you regret your loss not God's loss your grief is not for God's grief you've left

God out of the equation so what did the former prophets say was the appropriate way to fast and abstain and mourn I'm glad you asked have a listen to Isaiah 58 read the whole chapter at your leisure but we'll just home in on a few verses Isaiah 58 verse 6 is not this the fast that I choose to loose the bonds of wickedness to undo the straps of the yoke to let the oppressed go free and to break every yoke is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house when you see the naked to cover him and not to hide yourself from your own flesh and the chapter goes on in Isaiah 58 talking about what a fast looks like and should look like the kind of fasting that God's after is not one of outer display but one of inward repentance and change that's the kind of fast

[20 : 00] God's after it's one of love for God and so love for neighbour it's not an absence of food it's an absence of sin it's not a turning from food it's a turning from sin and the people didn't listen the former prophets didn't listen Isaiah chapter 66 speaks about it Jeremiah chapter 7 speaks about Malachi spoke the same things it's because your continued rejection of God's word that God sent them into exile for 70 years the fundamental problem that led to their loss and grief was their sin anything changed look at verse 8 to 14 the way God's people are supposed to live summarised in verses 8 to 10 of Zechariah and it's apparent that the people of Bethel don't live like this there had been no real repentance and the word of the Lord came to Zechariah saying thus says the Lord of hosts render true judgments show kindness and mercy to one other do not oppress the widow the fatherless the sojourner or the poor and let none of you devise evil against your neighbour in your heart that's the right way to fast that's the godly way to fast hear now how I want you to live don't be like your predecessors listen to what the predecessors were like in verse 11 they refused to pay attention and turned a stubborn shoulder and stopped their ears they might not hear they made their hearts diamond hard lest they should hear the Lord and the words of former prophets and what happened when they failed to obey god therefore great anger came upon them from the Lord of hosts look at verse 13 and as I called they were not here so they called and are not here says the Lord of hosts and I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations that they had not known thus the land they had left was desolate so that no one went to and fro and the pleasant land was made desolate god tells them why god sent Israel into exile in the first place they wouldn't listen to him they wouldn't listen to him and in the end he wouldn't listen to them he wouldn't listen to their cry for mercy their help it was all too late time and time and time again he'd warned them by the prophets his patience had run out their sin had reached its limit and so his great wrath came with the resulting ruining of the land their failure to repent had led to being cut off from the temple cut off from god to death so in answer to your question here's god's question what's your mourning and fasting all about was it for me that you fasted it seems you really haven't heard what i said in the first place was it for your sin that you fasted or just your loss and remember it's because Israel's hard heart and refused to obey god's word that the great anger from god came not just anger but great anger because god called them to repent gave them warning time and time again wooed them back to himself and they wouldn't come and god mostly warns them and they wouldn't listen so in the end god would not listen to them it seems like the people in bethel in zechariah's day are no different to the people in bethel in zayah's day their hearts are as hard as stone against god they have stopped their ears from hearing the word of god la la la la la they turn their whole body away from god as they turn their shoulders away from god i don't want to listen to you god too hard remember what the ancient prophet samuel said 1 samuel chapter 15 verse 22 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 so says god you asked me the question should i weep and abstain in the fifth month as i've done for so many years and i tell you your fasting is for the wrong reason you've missed the mark and did you notice we didn't we didn't get an answer to the question which then brings us to the end of chapter 7 and if you're anything like me you'll hate movies that end with to be continued you know you go to see the movie and it comes up like the hobbit long movie goes forever shouldn't be made that long in the first place and you've got to the dragon turns up and it comes up to be continued you go what's going on here well

Zechariah said it was like that this morning it's the first half of the movie and we'll be waiting i know you are waiting in anticipation for the second half so you'll have to come back next week or you can read chapter eight for yourself beforehand it wraps up the story brings us to a great grand final conclusion with the hope for the future now i'm not suggesting that our situation right now is the same as their situation then right we're not asking the question that Zechariah was asked i'm not saying that we're guilty of the same sins that led israel into disaster then there's lots of issues that we could consider this morning from this passage but the one key principle would take hold of is this i think and that is what do we do when god's word challenges in what we're doing that's a difficult one as god's people we can be well aware of god's word we are greatly blessed we have the bible open for us all the time we can meet in bible study groups and read down our own all kinds of stuff when we hear god's word it's such a good thing to be able to do that but what do we do when god by his spirit in his word confronts me of a particular sin luther the great reformer said that the whole of christian life is one of ongoing continual repentance repentance from my wrong and trusting that god's way is right i never stop sinning because i'm an expert at sinning and we will never stop sinning because well let's be honest so we will always opportunity to be humbling ourselves before him grieving my sin and asking him to forgive me trusting in his promises that he will right it's one key way that we know the spirit of god's at work in my life it's one sure way we know that we are one of god's people as his holy spirit exposes my wrong and my sin from his word and in me being made aware of it i am thankful thank you lord for exposing that sin in my life and the offense it is to you my god not just the trouble it causes me right and then not leave it there for godly grief leads to repentance and repentance from turning from it changing the way that i live and my attitude to sin which then calls me to ask god to forgive me which leads to salvation and no regret yeah there is and there will be no regret in repenting from sin there's nothing good about sin in the long run even though it might seem nice in the short term the people of zechariah's day were guilty of worldly grief right worldly grief does not lead to repentance worldly grief regrets being caught out for my wrong my sin worldly grief is recognized by a failure to repent and leads to death worldly grief is just about my pain and me not about god and his honor so it's imperative that we continue to turn towards god keeping our ears open with softened hearts as he graciously speaks to us in his word and that will lead to godly grief over my sin which produces repentance and leads to salvation with no regret now the great thing about our faith christianity is that we are not left under the condemnation of god our god is in the restorative business he does not delight in destruction he does not delight in bringing about judgment that's not his heart to desire to do that he particularly he delights in bringing salvation rescue redemption his heart is for our good not my ill his heart is for salvation rescuing people from slavery to sin and death by giving us his word his life giving word Jesus his son the lord jesus christ and as we humble ourselves before the lord jesus his promise is that he will exalt us and highly exalt us and seat us with him at the right hand of the father in glory and raise us up as his dearly loved sons and daughters let's pray our father in heaven we pray that you help us to be a people who have godly grief knowing that godly grief leads to salvation and no regrets hearts and we pray you help us to live as salt and light in this world as your people for your honour and your glory we pray it in jesus name amen