

Fasting and Feasting

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[0 : 0 0] Almighty God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, you have said that your word is living and active, that it's sharper than any sword, that it penetrates the division of soul and spirit, joints and marrow.

And you have made it able to judge the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. So please enable me to speak your word faithfully and please cause it to do in us what you have promised at will.

We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ and for his glory. Amen. Friends, I want to start today with a quote from a man called Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Now, Emerson was an American essayist, a lecturer and a poet who lived through most of the 19th century. And he summarised a sentiment which I think has probably become the catch cry of our age and I think particularly of the present generation.

Emerson said this, With the past I have nothing to do, nor with the future. I live in the present. Now, you see, I think we live in a world that thinks that that is what really matters, the present.

[1 : 0 6] And there are some great ones who seem to support this. For example, Henry Ford, as you might know, said this, History is more or less bunk. It's tradition. And we don't want tradition.

We want to live in the present. And the only history that's worth a tinker's dam is the history we make today. And even Jesus might be roped in to support the contention if you didn't really understand his words in the Sermon on the Mount.

He said, Therefore, don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough troubles of its own. However, I want to give you one more quotation.

I particularly like this one. I don't know who the author of it is, so I can't help you. But our author says this. If you have one eye on yesterday and one eye on tomorrow, you're going to be cockeyed today.

Friends, I wonder, do you think that's true? Is it true that if you have one eye on yesterday, one eye on tomorrow, then you're going to be cockeyed in the present? Is it true that a focus on the past and the present will make you really screwed up?

[2 : 1 0] Sorry, on the past and the future will make you screwed up in the present. Think on it. Keep it in the back of your minds, because right at the end of this Bible talk, we're going to come back to it. So with the question posed, let's have a look at our text for today.

Now, while I've been away, Andrew has been leading you through the book of Zechariah. At least I'm led to understand that's what he's been doing. Now, Zechariah was a prophet in the 5th century BC.

See, 90 years earlier, after centuries of disobedience, God had punished his people for their unrelenting disobedience by sending them off into exile. And then 17 or 18 years before this prophecy we're looking at here, God had worked so that his people returned home from exile under the edict of King Cyrus the Persian.

Now, Darius the Mede is now king. And Zechariah addresses his prophecy to people who are back in the land and who are renovating or actually rebuilding the temple.

And let's review what I hope you have learned so far. I'm sure you have. So open your Bibles with me at Zechariah chapter 1. In chapter 1, verses 1 to 6 of Zechariah, God reminded his people of their past.

[3 : 24] And he spoke to them in their present and he urged them to return to him. And he promised them that if they did, their future would be filled with good things. Look at chapter 1, verse 3.

God tells them to return or repent of past evil. He promises, if you do, I will return to you. And since that happened, since those words came, you've travelled some six chapters.

As you've done that, you might have alighted upon and remembered two particular figures that stand out in chapters 1 to 6. One figure is called the branch. One figure is called the high priest.

The other is called the branch. And the branch is a sort of future Davidic king. And somehow in him and during this time, the roles of priest and king meet. And this combination has an effect on the whole world.

So that's my very brief summary of six chapters. People outside of Israel, we're told, through this branch will be able to participate in Israel's blessings. A Davidic king, a Messiah, will build God's temple and it will be a temple for all the nations.

[4 : 28] Now, that's my all too brief summary of chapters 1 to 6. Now we come to chapters 7 to 14. Now, chapters 7 to 14 fall into two sections. 7 and 8.

And then verses 9 through to 14, which really look into the future. Now, chapters 7 and 8 are framed around one particular question.

That's what we're going to look at today. That question and its answer. I wonder if you can see it. Look at chapter 7, verse 1. It sets the context. In the fourth year of King Darius, the word of the Lord came to Zechariah on the fourth day of the ninth month, the month of Kislev.

Now, as it happens, we can actually, for the first, almost the first point in history, in biblical history, pinpoint the exact month. Because records were being kept at that point and we could do it.

So, the word of the Lord came to him in the month of December, 518 BC. Now, apparently the work on the temple is progressing. Zechariah's in the middle of his ministry.

[5 : 31] He's had a couple of years. He's got a couple of years coming. Let's read verses 2 and 3, which tells us what the issue is. A question is put to Zechariah as well as to the other priests and prophets.

And he will take it upon himself to answer that question. Here's the question, verses 2 and 3. The people of Bethel had sent Sharezer and Regimelech together with their men to entreat the Lord by asking the priests of the house of the Lord Almighty and his prophets.

And here's the question. Should I mourn and fast on the fifth month as I have done for many years? Now, let me explain exactly what's going on here. You see, apparently when the temple had been destroyed almost 70 years ago, the people were, in fact, slightly over 70 years, the people were moved to fast.

You see, fasting is often associated with mourning. And what greater thing to mourn over but the desecration of the temple in Jerusalem. But now the temple was being rebuilt. So the question that the people of Bethel had is a very good and natural question.

It's probably a question that was being asked around the villages and so on every time this particular month came up. You see, there's no biblical instruction to implement a fast for the desecration of the temple.

[6 : 45] They've been doing it. So in the light of the fact there's no instruction from scripture, what do the priests and prophets think about whether they keep doing it? Should they continue what they've been doing for about 70 years?

Or can they stop now? So there's the question. It sets the stage for two whole chapters. Too fast or not too fast? That is the question. With that question, let's see how Zechariah goes about giving an answer.

Now, look at verses 4 to 7. Zechariah doesn't actually answer the question. Mind you, it takes two chapters to answer the question. So he doesn't start off answering the question. Instead, God asks him or instructs him to ask a set of rhetorical questions about the fasting they have been doing for the last 70 years.

Now, here are the questions. Verse 5. When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months for the past 70 years, was it really for me that you fasted?

When you were eating and drinking, were you not just feasting for yourselves? Verse 6. Are these not the words which the Lord proclaimed through his earlier prophets when Jerusalem and the surrounding towns were at rest and prosperous and the Negev and the western foothills were settled?

[8 : 00] I wonder if you can see the point that's being made here. To fast or fast, that's not the question. What matters is your motivation and your sincerity in your fasting. And in the past, motivation in Israel for fasting had been false.

What's more, it had been full of self-pity and of self-centeredness and of legalism. Look at verse 6. It's the crux to all of this. Notice the words you and yourselves, a repetition of the same word in Hebrew.

This is what had been the focus of all their fast fasting. Not God, but themselves. It had been self-centered fasting rather than God-centered fasting. That's part one of this two-part answer.

Look at verses 8 to 14. Notice that Zechariah again doesn't answer the question, but look at what he does do. Look at verses 9 and 10. He tells them that fasting or not fasting is actually not the question.

What matters is godliness, love of neighbor and obedience. Can you see what he's saying? He's saying God's people should positively do two things. They should administer true justice and they should be active in showing mercy and compassion.

[9 : 08] But on top of that, they should do something actively in terms of avoiding things as well. They should not oppress the disadvantaged and they should not plot evil against each other.

And that was what God had said many times before the exile in places such as Isaiah 58. And it hasn't changed. But godliness, love of neighbor and obedience hasn't been part of Israel's past, which is part of the reason they ended up in exile.

And that's what God says in verses 11 and 12. And the result of their failure is spelled out in verses 13 and 14. God punished his people with exile and with desolation of the promised land.

So let's see if we can summarize what's been said in parts one and two of the answer. And let's do it by, let's use it to help us think about fasting from a biblical perspective.

You see, in these verses, God appears to be saying that when there are things to mourn for, then it is entirely appropriate to fast. But fasting is really a relatively minor matter.

[10 : 12] What matters is not whether you're putting things in your mouth or not, but what matters is where your heart is. And Israel's heart was where? On themselves, not on God.

It was on themselves and not on others. It was not on loving God and loving their neighbor. Can you see what God's saying to them? He's saying, if you're going to fast, then for goodness sake, do it properly.

Do it with a correct motivation, that is God. And do it with correct lives, that is lives of godliness. In other words, if you're going to fast, take your attention completely away from yourself and put it on God and others.

Love God, love your neighbor. Friends, I wonder if I could then just make some comments about fasting and being Christians. Here's a few things to consider. First, Jesus said that when you have the bridegroom with you, there's no need to fast.

Luke 5, 34 to 35. However, he gave hints that it might be appropriate to fast when the bride is taken away, when the bridegroom is taken away. At the same time, Jesus never regulates fasting or makes it a test of how spiritual you are.

[11 : 22] In other words, fasting is, I think, fine for Christians. But fasting is not required after you've had the feast of knowing Jesus and the blessings of forgiveness and God's presence that comes via Jesus.

Second point, fasting is generally encouraged in Scripture as an entirely appropriate way of humbling ourselves before God and bringing particular prayers and requests to him.

At various times in my life and on various particular occasions, I have fasted. It has been helpful in focusing my life before God. I do commend fasting as a Christian discipline.

But there is a third thing to say. That is, don't focus on outward deeds such as fasting before people. No, instead, focus on being godly. Godly in your relationship with God himself and godly in your relationship with others.

A fasting person who doesn't love his neighbour is fasting in vain. Okay, let's now get back to chapter 8. There's a marked change, you might notice, in chapter 8.

[12 : 31] Chapter 7 is full of rebuke. Chapter 8 is not. It is full of promise. Maybe Israel had doubted that God really was for them.

Maybe they doubted his love, his faithfulness, his commitment to them. Here, God says categorically, I am for you. Look at verse 3. God will return to Zion, he says.

He will dwell in Jerusalem. His city and his people will have this glorious future. It will even have a new name to match its new future. The name of Jerusalem will be Faithful City.

Now, let me tell you, that has not been its history. But now it will be Faithful City. And the mountain upon which it rests will be called Holy Mountain.

And look at who's going to inhabit this wonderful city. In verses 4 to 6, we find that it will be a city where the elderly will age in safety and care.

[13 : 29] And where children will play with glad abandon. It's a wonderful picture, isn't it? The aged and the young. Together. No fear. In the faithful city.

In verses 7 and 8, we find that the people of God will be saved by their God and they will populate the city. In fulfillment of the promises of the covenant God in Exodus, they will be his people. He will be their God.

He will be what he's always been. The faithful and righteous God. By the way, friends, I think verses 4 to 6 tell us something very deep, don't they? You see, they teach us that you can measure a society and a culture by how it treats people on the edges.

Does that make sense? You can measure a society by how it treats people on its edges. You measure it not by its business, not by its trade, not by its wealth, not by its industry and such things.

No, you measure a society by seeing how people who can't fend for themselves are treated and can live in your society. People such as children and the elderly.

[14 : 37] But let me tell you, in our contemporary context, we might add more. We might add, say, in Australia, the indigenous people of our land. We might add those who flee persecution and knock at our doors seeking shelter.

Friends, if that's how you measure a society and a culture, I fear we're not doing all that well here in Australia. Look at what we're finding out now about how we allow children to be treated in our institutions and even our religious institutions.

Look at how most of our elderly are locked up in places where only a small percentage of families ever visit them. My mother is in a hostel within our parish boundaries here. And the nursing staff at that place tell me that under 30% of the people there are ever, ever visited.

Not once a year, I'm saying. Ever visited. That's how we treat our elderly. Look at the failure of care we've exercised towards our indigenous population. And think about how we treat refugees in this one of the richest and emptiest countries of the world.

Friends, I'm not buying into the politics. Please, this is not a political statement. It's a question of morality. I'm speaking with the whole weight of scripture behind me. We must not avoid these questions, you see.

[15 : 52] But let's move on to verses 9 to 7. Now, my view, the heart of what's going on can be found in verses 14 to 17. Look at them with me. And look at what the Lord of hosts says to his people through Zechariah.

In verses 14 and 15, he tells them what he is going to do. That is, he says, I'm going to be a senior covenant partner. I've already demonstrated that I can do this by punishing you for sin.

I've acted according to covenant and done that. However, now what I'm going to do is act according to covenant and do good for you. I will bless you. Look at verses 14 and 15.

Just as I had determined, can you hear it, to bring disaster on you and showed you no pity when your ancestors angered me. That is, I acted according to covenant. Well, so now I have determined to do good again to Jerusalem and Judah.

So don't be afraid. And in verses 16 and 17, he tells Israel they too should act as covenant partners. Look at verses 16 and 17. And God says, these are the things you are to do.

[16 : 56] Speak the truth to each other and render true and sound judgments in your courts. Do not plot evil against each other and do not swear falsely. I hate all of this, declares the Lord.

If you've read anywhere in the Old Testament, you'll find out he really does hate those things. Can you see what God is saying? He's saying that in the past, that the past for Israel had not been a raging success.

It had been associated with covenant curses. However, God wants to focus on the present and the future. In verse 14, has it clear that God has determined Israel's future.

He had determined their past, but now he's going to determine their future as well. And he has determined that the present and the future will be associated with covenant blessings. After all, the Lord is jealous for his people.

The Lord will bless them in the land and the covenant blessings of his presence will be theirs. So in the words of verses 9 and 13, the people of Israel then should have strong hands to rebuild the temple.

[17 : 59] The symbol of God's presence with them. In other words, they are to love God and love the things of God. They're to hate the things he hates. But let's turn to the final verses of chapter 18.

God has addressed the real issues that lie under the question of fasting. Now he turns to the question that they came with, the one on the surface. I want you to notice what he says.

He speaks to Zechariah in verse 18. And Zechariah reports his words to the people in verse 19. And he says, This is what the Lord Almighty says. The feasts of the fourth, the fifth, the seventh and the tenth months will become joyful and glad occasions and happy festivals for Judah.

Therefore, love, truth and peace. Have you noticed something? How many fasts did they come with a question about? One, the fifth month, didn't they?

That was expanded to two fasts, the fifth and the seventh month in chapter 14, chapter 7, verse 5. Now, how many fasts have you got? Four.

[19 : 04] If you keep going exponentially like that, you know where you're going to get to. But can you see what he's saying? He's saying, and all of this fasting is going to be transformed.

No longer will your fasting be about looking back to the desolation of the temple. No longer will it be about mourning the desolation of the temple and the seeming absence of God and his punishment of you.

No, look at verse 19. Now it will be transformed into joyful and glad occasions for feasting, happy festivals, full of God's people, gladly eating in the presence of God and loving truth and peace.

But now look at verses 20 to 23. When God gave promises to Abraham in Genesis 12, they were against the backdrop of the Tower of Babel, you might remember, chapter 11.

When God separated and scattered the nations. Then in chapter 12, he promised that Abraham would be a means for blessing the nations again and putting things right. Well, now Babel is being reversed here in these verses.

[20 : 09] And blessing is flowing through Israel to the nations. Look at the note of blessing and commonality in verses 20 to 23. This is what the Lord Almighty says. Many people and the inhabitants of many cities will yet come.

And the inhabitants of one city will go to another and say, let us go at once to entreat the Lord and seek the Lord Almighty. I myself am going. And many peoples and powerful nations will come to Jerusalem to seek the Lord Almighty and to entreat him.

And this is what the Lord Almighty says in those days. Ten people from all languages and nations will take hold of one Jew by...

This is not meant to be taken literally, but metaphorically. The hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, let us go with you. Because we have heard that God is with you.

And friends, finally, look at verse 23. It indicates the sorts of things that might happen. When these sorts of things might happen, it will happen in those days. That is in the day of the Lord. And the New Testament speaks about a day.

[21 : 18] A day of the Lord happening after the death and resurrection of Jesus. And that's the point that Peter makes. Do you remember his first speech in Acts 2 at Pentecost? And on that very day, two things happen.

Do you remember? Languages are reversed. Because everyone hears people speaking in their own language. And people are saved into the joyful presence of God.

And the Spirit is poured out upon them. And then as Acts expands, pouring out of the Spirit comes upon Samaritans and even Gentiles. And they join with Christians.

And they go with them as they hear that God is with them in and through Jesus. And the days that God had spoken about in verse 23 have opened up into a whole new gospel era.

And opened up for the whole of humanity. Now before I leave Zechariah, I want to return to one little verse or two that I missed. Could you flip back to chapter 8 verse 6?

[22 : 17] Friends, let me tell you that as a Christian, I find it's often difficult to believe the words of God. That is to really take them on board, isn't it? It's difficult to believe God will really judge, I think, at times.

And yet Israel had experienced that he would fulfill that word. He did judge. And let me tell you, as a Christian, it's also often difficult to believe that he'll turn back from judgment. And it seems as though verse 6 hints that this is what the people of God felt.

They felt that it was just too incredible. Their words are too marvelous. That is too good to be true that God would turn back from judgment. But look at what God says. It's what he says again and again to people who doubt in Old and New Testaments.

He tells them that he's able. Just because they think it's difficult doesn't mean it's too difficult for God. All of this may seem marvelous to the remnant of God's people.

But God questions whether it will seem marvelous to him. It will not. For he is able. Friends, I want to urge you as Christians to take this on board. You see, nothing is impossible for God.

[23 : 24] He gives his word. And in Jesus, he fulfills that word. And to Jesus, he will fulfill. Or in Jesus, he will fulfill all his good promises. In him, they have their yes and their amen.

So what a great passage this is. But I want to conclude by returning to where we began. Do you remember the question? I spoke about the past, the present, the future. And I recalled a quotation that said, if you have your eye on yesterday and another eye on the tomorrow, you're going to be cockeyed today.

Well, I want you to notice what our author has done. Did you see it? You see, there are some parallels between chapter 7 and chapter 8. Chapter 7 focused on the past and its implications.

My summary of what God says to his people in chapter 7 is this. In the light of the punishment you've experienced, do this. Repent.

And live righteously in the present. In chapter 8, he shifted to look at the future. There was a promise of future restoration. And again, God said, repent.

[24 : 29] And again, he said, live righteously in your current life. Can you hear what's being said in this passage? God is a God of history. God shapes history according to his plan.

And he reflects that plan in his works in the world and among his people. So if you look at history, you can get a glimpse as to what God is about. In other words, the past can guide you.

And that's what God points out in this passage. But there's more. God also has a future. And you've seen this spelled out in this passage as well. And that future can also guide you.

And both will guide you to do what is right in the present. So in truth, if you keep your eye on the past and your eye on the future, you won't be cockeyed.

No, instead you'll see things straight and right. Friends, please understand what I'm saying. I'm saying the best way to have straight eyes is to have your eyes on the past and your eyes on the future.

[25 : 31] And to live appropriately in the light of both in the present. Now that in mind, I want to turn to one final thing to say. I want to turn to a New Testament passage that says similar things.

So in your Bibles, I want you to open at the book of Titus. It's page 1201. And I'm going to look at Titus chapter 2, verses 11 to 14.

And I want you to notice three things with me. First, I want you to notice verse 11. It speaks of a first appearing of Christ.

That appearing happened in the past. It was an appearing of the grace of God in Jesus, offering salvation to all. Second, look at verse 13. It speaks of a second appearing.

An appearing that will happen in the future. It will be an appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. But there is a third thing to notice in this passage.

[26 : 32] Look at the other words around those two appearings. Can you see them all? They are words about living godly lives in the present. Friends, if you are a Christian, then you must live in the present just as God urged the leaders, the Israelites in Zechariah.

The present is where you work out your godliness. It is where you care for the underprivileged, where you act rightly in relationships, where you obey God, where you demonstrate your love for God, where you demonstrate your love for your neighbor.

However, your life in the present is not predominantly formed by the present. It is formed by the past. And formed by the future God is forging in history.

You see, if you have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ, you have been bought with a price. And therefore, you must glorify God in your bodies in the present. However, your life is not only formed by your past.

It is also formed by the future. You see, if you are a Christian, you know one day God will wage a final and climactic war against evil. And he will judge all evildoers.

[27 : 39] And Satan will finally be dealt with. And God will consummate his kingdom. And Christ will appear as Lord and King. And only those who have lined up with God's plans in Jesus will be members of that future kingdom.

And your present is between these two appearings of Jesus. And everything you are and do in the present is formed by them. So friends, be zealous for good deeds.

Live by faith in Christ who died for you. And look forward to his blessed appearing at the end of time.