

4 Zechariah 7-8

TRUE RELIGION

Do you think it's possible to do Christian ministry/acts of service for your own ends? If so, how?

Read Zechariah 7

When you compare Zechariah 7:1 to 1:7, we realise that two years have now past since Zechariah was given those eight visions. But it's now only two years before the temple will be completed. In other words, construction is going according to plan and the end is in sight.

1. Throughout the period of exile, Israelites would fast to express their sorrow and one of their fasts (in the fifth month) was to mourn the destruction of the temple. A group of Israelites come from the town of Bethel, to Jerusalem, to ask a question of the Lord about fasting. What's the reason they are asking this question?

2. These Jews from Bethel don't get the answer they expect—a simple 'Yes' or 'No'. How would you describe the response the Lord gives to Zechariah?

3. According to verses 5-6, what's the problem with their fasting and feasting?

4. Is this a new complaint from God against the nation of Israel? Also, see 1:4-5.

5. What does God really desire of this people? (v8-10).

6. According to verses 11-14, what needs to change?

Read Zechariah 8

7. What does God plan to restore?

In chapter 8, there are ten messages that God gives to Zechariah. They all start with the words "This is what the Lord Almighty says...". Let's look at a few of these messages. Fill in the following table. Describe the image in the left column and its meaning in the right column.

Verses	Image	What the image represents
4-5		
6-8		
9-12		

8. According to verses 9, 13, 15-17, if God is to fulfil his promises, what must the people do?

9. How would you describe the content of God's promises in chapter 8?

One thing to keep in mind is that Zechariah's message contains both present and future elements. There are words for the present (for Zechariah's hearers) - 'let your hands be strong so that the temple may be built' (v9), but there are also words for the future - 'at that time' (v6) and 'In those days' (v10). And we should realise that Israel never experienced the fulfilment of such rich and amazing promises during the time of Zechariah. If God is waiting for truly repentant-loving hearts, for him to pour out his blessing on the nation, then it doesn't happen at all during the post-exilic period. The later prophet Malachi similarly brings the message of repentance, but again, there is no true repentance from the people. Looking further along the history of Israel, we can find the prophet known as John the Baptist. He called for a true inner repentance (Matthew 3:1-6) and like the former prophets, often directed his message to the leaders of the time, the Pharisees and Sadducees (Matthew 3:7-10). And Jesus himself criticises the religious leaders - they can be so fastidious about religious activity like fasting, yet be blind to their corruption and unloving attitudes (Matthew 6:16; Matthew 23; Luke 18:9-14). Fulfilment of the Lord's promises through Zechariah seem to be as far off as ever because of the requirement of the recipients to have righteous hearts. But then arrives Jesus who is righteous in every way.

10. If it's Jews from Bethel who seek the Lord at the start of chapter 7, who is it that seeks the Lord at the end of chapter 8?

11. God's covenant relationship with Israel, always included blessing for the nations (Genesis 12:2-3). Zechariah gives such a clear beautiful picture of this. How do the following passages show Jesus fulfilling and transforming the promises made in Zechariah:

Matthew 28:16-20

Acts 13:46-49

Revelation 7:9

12. As Gentile believers who follow Jesus today, is it possible to fall into the trap described in Zechariah, that is, to do outward religious acts for ourselves?

13. Why are religious acts appealing to perform?

14. What is the 'antidote' to false religion that will produce a life of true godliness?

What characteristics of false religion can be found in your life? How can you make sure that the 'antidote' to false religion is effective in your life?

15. The movement in Zechariah 7-8 is from fasting to feasts. The Jews ask about the place of feasting in their lives with the temple nearing completion. Fasting is an expression of mourning for those remembering their place in exile and awaiting that wonderful day of the Lord. Zechariah 8 ends with feasting - Jew and Gentile enjoying the presence of God and all the sumptuous blessing from being in relationship with their holy God. Discuss your feasting/fasting practices in light of what you have learned today.

Pray With 8v23 in mind, give joyful thanks that it was always God's plan to include Gentiles like us into his family. Give thanks for Jesus and the Holy Spirit who truly transforms our hearts. Ask that God would be at work in our lives, so that we would desire not outward religious performance, but true inward change.