

A Question About Fasting

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Date: 06 June 2021

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[0 : 0 0] we could this evening with the Lord's help and the Lord's enabling, if we could turn back to that portion of scripture that we read in the book of the Prophet Zechariah and chapter 7. Zechariah chapter 7 and if we read again from the beginning.

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 Kislev. Now the people of Bethel had sent Sharesar and Regim Melech 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.

Should I weep and abstain in the fifth month as I have done for so many years. You know when you live in a house with three boys you never know what to expect on any given day.

Apart from the noise and the mess and the constant bickering and fighting and shouting, apart from all that it's great fun. But one thing you have to deal with as it is with all children not just boys, one thing you have to deal with is all the questions because well in our house anyway those little men with those little minds they're full of little questions. Why, what, how, who, when and then they'll ask us do I have to. And in a 24 hour period you can be bombarded with lots and lots of different questions about anything and even everything. And that's not to say that asking questions is a bad thing. Asking questions is a good thing because it's the only way that we'll learn and grow and increase in our knowledge. And so it's good to ask questions because life raises lots of questions. And we have to ask the big questions of life. I hope that you ask the big questions of life. Why are we here? What's it all about? Why did this happen? What happens after death? Can I trust Jesus with my life and with my death? You know it's good to ask questions and it's good to ask the big questions of life because life and the things which take place in our lives they often raise lots of questions. That's why I believe that Christianity Explored and Bible Studies they're so important because they give us an opportunity to ask questions, big questions, important questions. And you know my unconverted friend this evening,

I often think that the thing which holds you back from committing and confessing Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, I often think that is it that you have questions that you'd like answered?

[2 : 5 3] Do you have questions that you would like answered? And I want to say to you that your questions will never be answered unless you ask them. Your questions will never be answered unless you ask them. So ask them. Ask your questions because that's what the people of Bethel did. They asked their question. They asked the prophets and the priests who were the church leaders at the time.

They asked them a question. Now it may not have been the question that you want to ask and it may not have been the topic that you would have brought up if you were given the opportunity but this is the question that they asked. They asked a question about fasting. It was a question about fasting and I'd like us to consider this passage this evening under three simple headings.

Three simple headings. A repentance request, a rebuking response and a rejected requirement. A repentance request, a rebuking response and a rejected requirement. So first of all, a repentance request. A repentance request. We'll read again from the beginning of the chapter.

It says 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 Kislev. Now the people of Bethel had sent Sherezar and Regan Melech 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. Now as we've discovered in our study both Haggai who is the prophet mentioned previous in the Bible and Zechariah they were not only contemporaries in the ministry they were also colleagues in the ministry and they had been called and commissioned to comfort and challenge God's people with God's word as they began living and looking beyond lockdown. And as you know and as we've

said many times before the Israelites they had spent 70 years living in lockdown in Babylon due to their rebellion and restoration, their rebellion and rejection of the Lord. But now they're back in the Promised Land. By God's grace this remnant has returned to the Promised Land of Israel and they've returned to rebuild and restore and renew and rededicate their lives to the Lord. And yet as we've seen that hasn't been without its problems because after they returned the remnant neglected the temple and they left it lying there desolate and derelict for about 15 years. And they left it like that until Haggai and Zechariah both began prophesying, preaching and proclaiming God's word in the year 520 BC. Haggai began with a call to rebuild in August 520 BC and Zechariah followed with a command to repent in November 520 BC.

And both prophecies they were dated to the second year of the reign of King Darius who was the Persian king and a successor to King Cyrus. Then three months later we're told that on the 15th of February 519 BC about five months into the restoration project of the temple the Lord spoke to this returned remnant through eight night visions. And in one night Zechariah he received eight night visions that would encourage this discouraged remnant in order to help them process and plan and prepare for a future living and looking beyond lockdown. And we've considered these eight night visions of Zechariah. We've looked at them over the past number of weeks and their purpose was to remind and reassure this returned remnant that even though they were still unsettled and unsure and uncertain about their future the Lord was still with them. But now as we move into chapter 7 we're told that Zechariah's prophecy this prophecy in chapter 7 it took place in the fourth year of King Darius and it was on the fourth day of the ninth month the month of Kislev.

[7 : 30] Now scholars they've worked out this date to be the 7th of December 518 BC. And so it's two years since Haggai issued the call to rebuild and then Zechariah followed with a call to repent.

And the work of the temple had it had begun on the 21st of September 520 BC and it wouldn't actually be completed until the 12th of March 515 BC. And so what we see here in this chapter is that the restoration project of the temple it's only halfway. They're halfway through the project. But it's at this point that some of the Israelites living in Bethel which was 12 miles north of Jerusalem were told that they sent two representatives to ask the prophets and the priests a question about fasting. Should I mourn and fast in the fifth month as I have done for so many years?

Should I mourn and fast in the fifth month as I have done for so many years? And you know it's an interesting question especially because it was now as we read it was now the ninth month and it would be a good few months before the fifth month would come round again. But maybe the people of Bethel they were good at planning ahead. Maybe they were far more organized than we are. Because if you're anything like me everything is last minute. And yet their question about fasting is significant because in order to express their guilt and their grief for their rebellion and rejection of the Lord that rebellion and rejection which led them to living in lockdown in Babylon because of that the Israelites had instituted four fasts in a year. There were four fasts a year.

They held a fast on the fourth, fifth, seventh and tenth month of the year. And each fast it was to encourage and enable the Israelites to mourn and repent over their past. Their past sin. The sin which resulted in them living in lockdown in Babylon. But the fast in the fifth month which is what this question of fasting is referring to the fast in the fifth month it was associated with the events of August 586 BC. August 586 BC was the year when Nebuchadnezzar's army they ransacked and they robbed and then they ruined the temple in Jerusalem. They destroyed the temple. They destroyed the palace.

[10 : 21] They broke down the city walls. And so the question about fasting in the fifth month seems a natural one because the Israelites they're asking they're asking the question now that we're out of lockdown now that we're living and looking beyond lockdown now that the temple is being rebuilt and restored and renewed and rededicated to the Lord do we need to continue fasting and mourning over the sins of the past if the past has been dealt with they were saying do we need to keep sorrowing over this specific sin if the rebellion and rejection of the Lord has been repented off do we need to keep repenting of this particular sin do we need to keep mourning over our mistake if that mistake has been forgiven and you know this is a great question because it's actually a very relevant question it's a it's a question that's actually very relevant to you and I this evening because how often do we cling to our cleansed sin how often do we cling to our cleansed sin you know when we come to Christ and seek cleansing we have the biblical promise if we confess our sin he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness because

the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin and we have the promise from the very lips of Jesus ask and you shall receive seek and you shall find knock and the door will be opened to you and yet what often happens is that we come to Christ with our sin and we come to him asking and seeking and knocking that he would take it all away from us and then we take it away with us we ask him to take it away from us and when we leave him we take it away with us you know my friend we have the promise and the assurance that in Christ our sin is dealt with it's cleansed it's forgiven it's washed away it's taken away from us as far as east is distant from the west and it's even cast into the depths of the sea to be remembered no more so the question is why do we keep clinging and keep confessing our cleansed sin when it has been done and dealt with in Christ my friend the promise of Jesus and it's as relevant to us tonight as when Jesus first spoke it the promise of Jesus is whatever you ask in prayer believe that you have received it and it will be yours whatever you ask in prayer believe that you have received it and it will be yours so if you're repenting of sin if that's what you're asking about in prayer believe that you have received forgiveness and it will be yours when you come to Jesus with your sins leave them with them don't take them away with you leave them with Jesus so whatever you ask in prayer believe you have received it and it will be yours as was that her eye a chapter seven it opens with a repentance request but then it's followed by a rebuking response a rebuking response so a repentance request and a rebuking response a rebuking response look at lurch four then the word of the lord of hosts came to me say to all the people of the land and priests and the priests when you fasted and mourned in the fifth month and in the seventh 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 we're 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 you know when the question about fasting was asked it seems that the priests the priests weren't prepared with an answer but the lord gave his prophet an answer and you know it should be a reminder to us as we said earlier that it's good to ask questions and it's good to ask the big questions of life because life and the things which take place in our lives they often raise a lot of questions therefore it's good to ask questions and it's good to have the opportunity to ask questions big questions and important questions that concern us and you know I love questions I love questions and I love when people ask questions questions that they have a care and a concern about and you know as a minister and as elders in a congregation I believe that we should be available and approachable for anyone to ask us a question at any time we should be available and approachable for anyone to ask us a question at any time I think it's so important that people are able to approach and ask anything that's burdening them or bothering them now like it was for the priests just because people ask important and inquisitive questions that doesn't mean we're going to know the answer to every question off the top of our head and out the tip of our tongue but it does mean that with that person who's asking the question we can look it up together we can search for the answer together or even we can come back with an answer and continue the conversation so it's good to ask questions and this question about fasting it had created a bit of discussion and debate because the Israelites the Israelites they weren't asking to stop fasting all together they were only asking about fasting on the fifth month and fasting in relation to the destruction of the temple the Israelites weren't asking to do away with fasting all together because they knew that fasting was important they knew that fasting was integral to their worship and they knew that fasting was part of scripture it was in scripture but you know for many of us living in the 21st century we would consider fasting as irrelevant to the Christian life rather than important to the Christian life however we can't say that fasting is irrelevant because Jesus taught us about the importance of fasting in the sermon on the mount now recent research has shown that fasting has many physical benefits such as aiding weight loss and helping towards a healthy heart and a healthy mind but you know when Jesus spoke about fasting he wasn't speaking about it for physical reasons but spiritual reasons because Jesus says that prayer and fasting it was all part of focusing upon sin and repentance you know that's why the Thursday of a communion season it was often considered to be the fast day it was the day of prayer and fasting there was where there was to be this focus upon sin and repentance but as a nation the Israelites were called upon to engage in prayer and fasting during a time of national crisis that's why they had appointed four fast days throughout the year they were to pray fast and focus upon the sins of the past and repent and inevitably the Lord taught his people a spiritual discipline with prayer and fasting it was a spiritual discipline and you're asked we carefully consider this passage together you

know we should be asking ourselves the question in a national crisis should we be calling all Christians and churches to come together for a day of prayer and fasting in a national crisis should we be calling all Christians and churches to come together for a day of prayer and fasting and immediately my mind says yes but then I start thinking well maybe no and I'll tell you why when Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount he taught about our motive our motive when praying giving and fasting and he said that praying giving and fasting is not to be a public demonstration and declaration but a private devotion and discipline praying giving and fasting is not to be a public demonstration and declaration but a private devotion and discipline and as you know Jesus he doesn't mince his words because he says don't be like the hypocrites don't be like the actor on the stage don't make your Christianity a performance don't be a counterfeit Christian don't be like the hypocrites and practice your religious righteousness before others don't seek the glory of men don't desire the praise of people don't look to others for your approval or your likes or your shares don't do your praying and your giving and your fasting so that others can see you and think how religious and how righteous and how holy you are as a Christian or as a congregation or as a church and Jesus says those who do these things they have their reward because the motive of the holy hypocrite is the glory and praise of men not the glory and praise of God therefore in light of what Jesus teaches you know it's a question we should ask ourselves should we be calling all Christians and congregations and churches to come together for a national day of prayer and fasting yes privately but not publicly because you know the motive for praying giving and fasting is not to be a public demonstration and declaration but a private devotion and discipline and you know this is something we need to remember as Christians as congregations and as a church because our motive and our message is not to splash ourselves on social media and say look at me look what I'm doing no our our motive and our message is to be a Christian and a Christian and a Christian and a Christian and a Christian and a Christian and a Christian and a Christian and a media and say look at me look what I'm doing no our our motive and our message is look at Jesus and look what Jesus has done and and follow him love him look to him lean upon him my friend our prayer and fasting is not to be shared with the public but kept secretly in private Jesus said your father who sees in secret he will reward openly your father who sees in secret will reward openly and you know this is why the Lord asks in verse five was it for me that you fasted was it for me that you fasted because as far as the Lord was concerned the Israelites and their public demonstration and declaration of prayer and fasting these fast days that they had throughout the year it was becoming nothing but religious righteousness and holy hypocrisy their motive was all wrong and the Lord asks them was it for me that you fasted was it to bring glory and praise to me or was it to bring glory and praise to you was the public demonstration and declaration of prayer and fasting to bring glory honor and praise to you and then we read in verse eight the word of the Lord came to Zechariah saying thus says the Lord of hosts render through judgment show kindness and mercy to one another do not oppress the widow the fatherless the sojourner or the poor and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart you're in response to their question about fasting the Lord calls his people to practice privately what they profess publicly he calls them to practice privately what they profess publicly and that's what the Lord is addressing he's addressing the commitment of his people because you know it's one thing to publicly profess that you're committed in your Christian character conduct and conversation but it's another thing entirely to privately practice your commitment in your Christian character conduct and conversation and you know my friend the point that the Lord is making to his people here and us tonight is that we can emphasize our commitment to the Lord but there needs to be evidence of our commitment to the Lord and the Lord says that this is clearly seen not only in your relationship with me but also in your relationship with others because the Lord says show kindness and mercy to one another literally it's show covenant love show chesed and compassion to one another and what the Lord is emphasizing is that because you're part of a covenant community because you're part of a church therefore you ought to show love and compassion to one another or in other words in the words of Jesus love one another just as I have loved you for by this all people will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another therefore as those who are in Christ as those who have come to know and experience the covenant love of God in our lives we have received that spirit of adoption we've been brought into the family of God where God is our father Jesus is our elder brother and we're united to Jesus Christ by faith we're in union with Christ we're bonded by his blood we're united as one people therefore we're to love one another we're to look out for one another as a congregation but more than that we're told

here that we're to love one another and look out for one another as a community because the Lord has a care compassion and concern for everyone in our congregation and in the surrounding community that's why the widow the fatherless the stranger and the poor are mentioned in fact that's what we were singing about earlier in Psalm 146 we were singing about the Lord's care compassion and concern for the widow the fatherless the stranger and the poor how the Lord cares for everyone in our congregation and also in our community but you know what we see in this closing section is that the Israelites of the past they didn't show that care concern and compassion that the Lord showed because they rejected the Lord's requirement they rejected the Lord's requirement and that's what we see lastly a rejected requirement so there's a repentance request there's a rebuking response and a rejected requirement a rejected requirement now look at verse 11 we're told but they refuse to pay attention and turned a stubborn shoulder and stop 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 a 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 you know if God spoke to you personally and directly you would think that you'd listen and obey what he says but you know when God spoke to the people of Israel prior to the exile we read here that they deliberately and decidedly refused to listen and obey they rejected and rebelled against God's word they refused to repent of their sin and turn back to the Lord and Zechariah he goes on to give this this detailed description of the Israelites and why they rejected and rebelled and refused to listen and obey the Lord because he not only says that they refuse to pay attention he also says that they turned a stubborn shoulder they turned a stubborn shoulder which is he's giving to us the image of a wild beast that's powerfully and persistently refusing to allow a yoke to be placed upon them and that's what Israel were like they were powerfully and persistently refusing and rejecting the yoke of the Lord so much so that we're told that they they stop their ears that they they put earbuds in their ears they put

[29 : 20] their fingers in their ears so that they wouldn't have to listen to the voice of the Lord speaking into their lives but more than that we read there in verse 12 that they made their hearts how hard diamond hard you can't get much harder than a diamond and yet the Israelites they hardened their hearts against God's word God's will and God's way that's what we're told they made their hearts diamond hard unless 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 you know the Lord reminds his people through his prophet that prior to the exile in Babylon before 586 BC he had repeatedly called the people to repent the Israelites had been repeatedly rebelling and rejecting the Lord because of their idolatry they had turned to all these false gods and these false idols and they had spent their life and wasted their time on all these idols but in order to turn them back the Lord he sent prophet after prophet after prophet to call the covenant people to repentance and the Lord he graciously and he lovingly warned his people he said to them if you don't repent then judgment is coming judgment is coming you need to repent

God was speaking but their fingers were in their ears they weren't listening they weren't listening they were ignoring the voice of God in their lives and it was going to end in disaster destruction and death and it did and because they refused to listen to the Lord as we read there in verse 13 the Lord refused to listen to them they refused to listen to the Lord so the Lord refused to listen to them and as we know they sent the Lord sent and scattered the Israelites into exile in Babylon leaving this pleasant and promised land desolate and that's how the chapter ends and that's how it will end for everyone who refuses and rejects the voice of the Lord in their life you know my unconverted friend that's how it will end for you that's how it will end for you if you continue to stop your ears and close your eyes and harden your heart to God's word it will end like this chapter ends it will end in judgment in the judgment of disaster destruction and death but you know this chapter it ends this way in order to remind this returned remnant that the people of the past the people before the exile they should have been praying and fasting because of their sin their idolatry their rebellion they should have been repenting back then but they weren't they weren't therefore what the Lord is saying to them is if this return remnant that is now looking and living beyond lockdown if they're going to stop praying and fasting because of the past because the temple is now being rebuilt if

they're going to stop praying and fasting because of the the sin that brought the destruction of the temple then they need they need to make sure that they've learned from the Lord in the past they need to make sure that they're living with the Lord and for the Lord in the present and then they need to make sure that they're looking to the Lord for the future if they're going to stop praying and fasting over the temple and the destruction of the temple then they need to make sure that they've learned from the Lord in the past they're living for the Lord in the present and looking to the Lord in the future and you know when you actually read this passage it's amazing what the Lord has done it's amazing what the Lord actually does here because he's turned this the Lord has turned this initial question about fasting and he's turned it on its head and he's made this question about a lesson he's made this question a lesson about covenant commitment which was actually the real issue for the Israelites they needed commitment the Lord knew what their greatest need was and it was covenant commitment and the Lord will speak to them in chapter 8 we'll consider that next time the Lord emphasizes his covenant commitment to his people but you know in this chapter in chapter 7 the Lord is asking his people he's asking them are you committed to me are you committed to me and you know my friend it's an important question we might have lots of questions we might have questions about fasting or different questions but the question the Lord is asking you this evening is are you committed to me are you committed to me are you committed to the Lord's cause are you committed to the Lord's people are you committed to the Lord's house are you committed to the Lord's word are you committed to the Lord's will are you committed to the Lord's way are you committed to the Lord's day are you committed to the Lord's worship are you committed

to the Lord. And if you say that you are, then the Lord is asking you, where is the evidence to prove that you are committed to the Lord? Where is the evidence? Because, you know, we can't be like the people of the past, the people of before the exile, before lockdown. Lockdown has to change us. That's what the Lord is saying. Lockdown has to change us. We can't be like the people of the past who deliberately and decidedly rejected and rebelled and refused to listen and obey the Lord. We can't be those who stop our ears and close our eyes and harden our hearts and powerfully and persistently refuse to put the yoke of the Lord upon us. No, we need to make sure that we are learning from the Lord in the past. We are living for the Lord in the present.

[35 : 58] And we are looking to the Lord in the future. We need to make sure that we're learning from the Lord in the past. That we're living for the Lord in the present. And that we're looking to the Lord in the future. My friend, we need to surrender and submit our lives under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. We need to do as He urges us in the Gospel because He calls us to put on that yoke.

We need to submit and surrender to the Lordship of Jesus because He says, Come unto me, all ye that labour under heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you.

Learn from me, for I am meek and lowly in heart, and you shall find rest for your souls, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light. My friend, this question about fasting, it became a question about commitment. And the question the Lord is asking us is, are you committed to the Lord?

Are you committed to the Lord? Well, are you? Are you committed to the Lord?

Well, may the Lord bless these thoughts to us. Let us pray together. O Lord our gracious God, we give thanks to thee that when we come to thy word, that the Lord one who is willing to teach us, and we confess that often our hearts are stubborn, and that we are unwilling to listen. But we do pray this evening that thou hast enabled us to be a people who are committed, committed to the cause, committed to our Christ, committed to loving Him and following Him, and living for Him, seeking to bring glory to His name, and that whatever we do in secret, that we would do it earnestly, wholeheartedly, to the Lord. O forgive us Lord for our apathy, forgive us for our laziness, forgive us for our lack of commitment to thee, and help us we pray to realize that thy word is calling us to live Christ-centered lives for the glory of God and the furtherance of His kingdom. Bless this Lord in the week that lies ahead, a week that is unknown to us. But Lord we do pray that in this coming week we would witness for thee that we would seek to live lives that bring glory to thy name, and seek to extend thy kingdom even further. Go before us we pray for Jesus' sake. Amen. Well we're going to bring our service to a conclusion by singing the words of Psalm 16. Psalm 16 we're going to sing the words in Gaelic it's verses 8 and 9. So Psalm 16 verses 8 and 9. I'll read them first of all in English.

[39 : 15] Before me still the Lord I said, Sith it is so that he doth ever stand at my right hand, I shall not moved be, because of this my heart is glad and joy shall be expressed in by my glory and my

flesh in confidence shall rest. Psalm 16 it's a Psalm all about the resurrection of Jesus, it's the Psalm of the empty tomb and in this Psalm we're being called to live committed lives to our resurrected Savior. So Psalm 16 it verse 8. So these verses of Psalm 16 to God's praise.

Amen.

Amen.

Amen.