

How Then Shall We Live? (Part 1)

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Date: 02 June 2024

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[0 : 0 0] turn now to Zechariah chapter 7. We've been going through our series in Zechariah. We're now on Zechariah chapter 7. We're going to be doing Zechariah 7 and 8 this week, but there was so much in Zechariah chapter 7 that we'll be doing Zechariah 8 next week. So Zechariah chapter 7 that's on the screen and we'll read together. 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. Now the people of Bethel had sent Charizah and Regum 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've 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 for these seventy 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 round 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, 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 Lord and the words of the Lord of hosts, 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.

Amen. Let me just pray again as we turn to this. Heavenly Father, we pray that you would open our ears and soften our hearts and plant your word deep down. We pray that you would grow a harvest of righteousness and draw hearts close to you by your word now, we pray. In Jesus' name, amen.

Well, we're back in Zechariah and if I could just have the first slide, that verse one there really helps us to remember where we are in the book. As we see, it's the fourth year of King Darius and the word of the Lord comes to Zechariah in the fourth day of the ninth month. So it's the fourth year of Darius, that's roughly 518 BC, almost two years after the night visions that we've been going through so far in chapters one to six. And Darius was the king of Persia. His empire ruled over a large part of the known world. Remember how there was, there was one United Kingdom, one kingdom, one kingdom under King David and then Solomon, but then that split into two, the northern kingdom, Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. And in each kingdom had some, each kingdom had some good days, but in general the kingdom of Israel went down, down, down as it turned away from God and the kingdom of Judah slowly followed after it as they too turned away from God. And in 733 BC, the northern kingdom of Israel was sent off into exile and shortly later in 587

BC, the kingdom of Judah went off into exile in Babylon. Now the reason the Persians are now in charge is because as world superpowers, jostle for power, Persia took over Babylon and there's new foreign policy and they sent, and then they sent the exiles of Israel back 70 years after back to Israel. Now 70 years, just as God had promised that the exile would last 70 years, so God moves, moves nations around and brings his people back home from exile. And that's the point where we find ourselves. Zechariah is speaking as is one of the prophets along with Haggai who spoke to this people who had just come back from exile. As a prophet Zechariah was God's spokesman. He spoke for God, instructing the people how to live, calling them back to God. And over the past few weeks we've seen in the night visions, one of the particular emphases that has dwell and from where, from which he would bless his people and bring restoration. Now we're now two years after that work on the temple has started. They've listened, people of Israel have listened to that call to get building. They've been building the temple in two years time from the chapter right now, the temple will be built. And the people in the surrounding towns around Jerusalem are starting to pay attention. They've noticed that the temple is being rebuilt and they have expectation and hope and excitement. The temple is going to be rebuilt. Is God going to return? Is God going to restore and renew his people? And because of that expectation we see in verse two and three, a delegation comes from Bethel to ask a question. And their question is, should we keep weeping and fasting as we've essentially done for so many years as it says there for these past 70 years? And Zechariah doesn't answer the question straight away. We'll get to it next week at the end of chapter eight. But actually he uses this question as an opportunity to talk about a much bigger issue. God's people have been rescued from exile. How then should they live? You've been saved, you might say, but for what? What are God's people saved for? How then should we live? And that's a question we all need to think about as well. A Christian is someone who you might say has come out of exile. Over the past few weeks we've seen that the historical story of the exile in some ways mirrored the biggest story kicked out of Eden and all humanity after them. And as we look forward to God restoring us and bringing us back to himself, that exile and return is a microcosm, a little picture of the bigger story of humanity. And prophets like Zechariah, as they talked about a physical return from exile from Babylon, as they talked about restoration, they also had an eye on the bigger story. And on God's promise to send the Messiah who would do this big restoration, who would bring the people, bring people from all nations back from exile from God and gather them once more to him. And over the past past few weeks we've seen that Jesus is that Messiah, the one who's come to cleanse, who's come to restore through his death and resurrection. So if you are trusting in Jesus this evening, then we need to ask that question as well. We've been saved, but for what? We've been returned from exile by Christ, but for what? How then should we live as God's people? If you wouldn't call yourself a Christian though, this question is still relevant. How does

[7 : 41] God want his people to live? You might look at church and think, well, what should God's church look like? Is this something I want to join in with and be a part of? The Bible tells us that God is more concerned about more than just a profession of faith. God also wants whole life. That verse that we began the service with summarizes it well.

In Ephesians chapter 2 verse 8 to 10, it says, by grace you have been saved through faith. And what's the purpose? Well, we've been created in Christ Jesus for good works that we should walk in them. So in other words, like the people who have come out from exile, we have been saved and we've been saved for a purpose to live as God's faithful people.

Zechariah talks about them in chapter 8 as a faithful city. So how then should we live? What does it look like for us to live as a faithful city, as a faithful people? In chapter, we're given two parts of an answer. In chapter 7, we see that the faithful city learns from past mistakes. And next week we'll see in chapter 8, the faithful city lives in light of future restoration. So now this week, the faithful city learns from mistakes of the past. The question is, should we weep and fast? And Zechariah responds by saying, you need to learn from the lessons of the past. And that comes to them, learn from the mistakes of the past, first with a heart lesson and then a history lesson. So Zechariah has people coming to him saying, what should we do? They're asking, what should we do? Should we keep fasting and mourning? And do you notice, I think it's significant that Zechariah doesn't just tell them what to do straight away. That would be so easy, wouldn't it be? It's so easy to just say, okay, look, you need to sort this out in your life, you need to do this, you need to do that. But Zechariah is a good pastor. He knows that for someone what to do. For real change, you need to go deeper. You need to go to the heart. And so Zechariah asks them a question to move from hands to heart, to move from thinking to feeling, to move from action to motivation. And we see that in verse four, he's 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 and in the seventh, for those 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? In other words, he's saying this religious action, God says, why do you do it? Is it for you? Or is it for me? Are you fasting to look pious? Are you praying to feel holy? Are you giving to look generous? What are your motivations? What is in your heart? Why are you doing these things? Is it to pat yourself on the back? Is it to be praised by other people? Or is it to please God? And that wasn't just the challenge for

Zechariah's readers. Jesus takes it up a notch in his Sermon on the Mount that we heard that murder read for us earlier on. He says, 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's in heaven. And he expands that in just the ways we've been talking about.

He says, when you give to the needy, don't look for the praise of others. When you are praying, don't be like the hypocrites standing at the street corners, long prayers, big words, things to make yourself look much, they must really love God. Let your fasting be in secret.

[11 : 26] In other words, both Zechariah, God is saying through Zechariah, Jesus repeats that what we do is important, but what God cares about even more is what's going on in our hearts.

What's going on in our hearts is more important than outward religion, you might say. And so we need to examine our hearts. We need to examine our hearts like Zechariah's audience did. We need to ask ourselves, when I pray, when I pray publicly, why do I pray long prayers or use Christian language or quote verses from the Bible? Those aren't bad things, but we need to ask ourselves, do I do it to please people? Do I do it to impress people?

Do I do it because that's what Christians should be seen to do? Or do I do it to please God and to build others up? When I come to church on a Sunday, why am I here? Is it to look like a Christian? Or is it to meet with God and with his people? Or what about what we wear to church? Are we, whether it's dressing up or dressing casual, who are we doing that for? What are our motivations? Or what about what I do and don't do on a Sunday? Is that to look right in the eyes of people around you? Or is it to genuinely focus on God?

What about serving? Are we serving to be seen? Or are we serving out of an overflow of our love for God? I can stand here and I need to ask myself our hearts. For Zechariah, who's asking this fasting, this religious action, who is it for? What is your heart motivation?

And when we talk about heart motivations, when we drill down and ask what's going on in our hearts, those are searching questions. Maybe they're uncomfortable questions, but they're vital questions if we want to have healthy hearts. Questions about our hearts are like using the contrast dye in an angiogram that it's a heart and blood vessel scan. You might feel uncomfortable when it's injected through a catheter. You might feel nervous about going to the appointment. But when that contrast medium flows through your blood vessels, it's going to show which vessels are narrowed and which ones are blocked. And when the consultant sees those constrictions or whatever, he's not going to get angry at you and start shouting at you for how much you've exercised, not exercised, or for what you've eaten or for what genetic defects you might have that give you a predisposition to heart problems.

[13 : 59] No, they're going to help you to have a healthier heart. And in a similar way, when we allow God's word to expose the motivations of our hearts, when we prayerfully ask for God to show us what's inside, yeah, it might be a bit uncomfortable. And we might feel nervous about how other people are going to react as we see it, as we talk through our hearts with other people. But God doesn't shout at us about our heart condition, even though unlike our physical hearts, the state of our spiritual hearts is all our fault. But rather, we still have heart motivation, though, isn't anything new. If you look in verse, we'll see that in verse seven, those Zechariah reminds his people there that the prophets had spoken to their great grandparents before the exile, 70 years before, all about their hearts. And that brings us to our next point. We've had a heart lesson, now a history lesson. Verse seven, we're not these the words about your hearts. We're not these the words that the

Lord proclaimed by the former prophets, when Jerusalem was inhabited and prosperous, with her cities round her and the south and the lowlands were inhabited. Zechariah is looking back to a time of prosperity when these, when the cities were built, when their lowland and the south were inhabited. And he's saying, even in those times before the exile, the prophets were talking about your hearts. Why did God send Judah into exile? Was it because that they stopped doing the sacrifices in the temple daily? Was it because they stopped all the fasts and all the festivals? Well, they maybe weren't always perfect to that, but no, that wasn't the main reason. Zechariah says that the former prophets before the exile were telling people then, just like now, the big deal isn't ultimately whether you're fasting or feasting. The big deal is why you do it. The big deal is all about your heart.

For example, the prophet Hosea, through the prophet Hosea, God says this, for I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings. But the problem with pre-exile Israel wasn't just their heart motivation, it was just that their hearts weren't in it at all. In Deuteronomy 6 verse 5, God famously gives Israel the command.

God Jesus calls the most important command to love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and all your might. And later in Leviticus 19, Jesus called the second most important command to love your neighbor as yourself. And God gave his law and the sacrifices and the feasting, all of that part of his law, not as just an end in and of itself.

All of that was meant to be an expression of love for God. How do you love God? Well, you love God by loving the things God loves, by hating the things God hates, by devoting time to God, by setting aside time to mourn sin and to focus on pleasing God. They weren't ends in and of themselves, it was all meant to be about heart love the whole time. It was not a replacement, not an alternative. But over time the Israelites took the outward bits, the easy bits and they lost the inward bits. Their hearts stopped loving God. They stopped loving neighbor as themselves. They stopped loving God. And Zechariah describes those things in verses 8 to 12. First we see that loss of love for neighbor. And the word of the Lord verse 8 came to Zechariah saying, thus says the Lord of hosts, render true judgments, 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.

[17 : 52] It's easy to look like God's church on a Sunday. But the real question is what is our heart attitude towards other people? People might notice if we're not at the prayer meeting, but they probably won't notice if you're speaking harshly to your spouse. They might, they won't notice if you're being above reproach at work. If you're being honest, if you're having mercy on those who are easy to ignore, if you're using your power to crush those who are weaker than you, those things people won't notice. It's those unseen ways of loving one another though that God does notice. And verses, I think verse 10 is particularly challenging.

But none of you devise evil against another in your heart. Who sees that? Who sees our hearts? Who sees whether we're filled with bitterness and anger against other people? Unforgiveness or whether we're just muttering and grumbling in our hearts about someone?

Only God sees that. He sees it all though. He sees our hearts and he hates hypocrisy. Jesus says to the Pharisees, 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. You blind guide straining out a net and swallowing a camel.

You see the easy, visible ritual religion, that's easy to do. But as a result, the Pharisees neglected the more important commands about how we, how to treat people.

Is that demonstrated in the unseen ways that you treat people? Are you more concerned with, I don't know what it is. Maybe as one example, though, are you more concerned with being at both services than actually using the time and the service to invest in others, to encourage one other people and build other people up? Have you got the proportions wrong? Are you straining at gnats, but swallowing camels to drill down a little bit more? Let me ask, what are you most concerned about? What upsets you most? What works you up most? You know, what are the things we're most concerned about fishing out of the soup? Is it gnats or is it camels? Is it when someone hangs washing on their line on a Sunday? Or is it when someone doesn't want anything to do with Jesus? What makes us more upset? Do we get more upset in how the chairs are laid out at church or when there's a mess or when we know that there's tension and there's unforgiveness and disunity? Do we get more passionate about what we sing or don't sing or when the band make a mistake which they never do or whether it's sing psalms or whether it's solter? Or we're more passionate about encouraging each other through singing? What's the state of our hearts? If you had a spiritual angiogram, what would be the result? What would it say about how your heart attitude is towards other people?

[20 : 58] Are you more concerned with what God is concerned about? Or are you straining gnats and swallowing camels? There's love for neighbor through the temple. I wonder how many times they sat through sermons and outside might have looked to them and thought, man, they really must love God. They're in the temple all the time. But what was going in? What were they allowing to go in? What are you and I allowing to go in? Verse 11, 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. Let me ask, do you love God? Are you listening to him? You cannot claim to love God if you are refusing to listen to him. Jesus says, if you love me, you will keep my commandments. That starts with listening to him. If your husband or your wife or your friend says, I am claims to be hearing you, but actually they're ignoring everything you say. There's a problem. Now we all have times when we're not good listeners, maybe we switched off, but if ignoring is normal and we're not sorry and we're not trying to listen better to our spouse or our friend, whatever it is, well, they might be and that's regular. Then it might be fair for them to start to question whether you do really value them, whether you really do love them. That's even more true with our relationship with God. If we love God, we will listen to him even when he says things that we don't like, or if we find hard, if we love God, we will listen to him. And if you are regularly, well, then you need to ask yourself, do I really love God? What is the state of your heart? If you had a spiritual angiogram that looked at the state of your heart and the state of your love for God, what would it see is your heart diamond hard to God's voice? Maybe this is your first time in church or online.

Maybe you sat through services all your life. Are God's words though just bouncing off? In you know, forget in one ear out the other, a diamond hard heart. There's no penetration there. Nothing goes in. Or as your heart fertile soil ready for God's word to be planted deep.

Are you praying that as you come to church, as you hear God's word, as you open it at home, that God would plant his word deep in your heart. The nation of Israel before the exile had hard hearts. They were full of his hypocrisy and their lives were all about outward religion. It was ritual and not relationship. And the result was that in the end, God judged them for what they were. He famously says to the prophet Hosea, you are not my people.

We see that in verses 13 and 14. As I called, they would not hear. And so they called and I would not hear says the Lord of hosts. And I scattered them with a whirlwind among the nations that they had not known. Thus the land was left desolate so that no one went to and fro and the pleasant land was made desolate. They stopped listening. And so God stopped listening. And in the end, some of them came after the exile. Most of them came before the exile. Most of them was God calling to the people again and again and again to come back to him. But in the end, God said, I'm going to stop listening to you and I'm going to send you off to exile. It isn't a nice topic to talk about. But if you persistently refuse to listen to God, when you die or when Christ returns one day, he will scatter you and cast you out for eternity. Why does Zechariah bring up the past like this? Well, he wants to know if his audience then, if we today have learned the lesson from the exile, one, that God cares about our hearts, two, that relationship is more important than ritual.

So what's the solution? Because I don't think there's a single one of us here who can take that angiogram of God's word and come out without a concern about our hearts. Well, God not only spoke by his prophets to say, you've got a heart problem. He also spoke to say and to promise a solution. In Ezekiel 36 verse 26, he says, and I will give you a new heart and I will put a new spirit within you. I'll remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. Humanity has a historic heart problem.

[25 : 56] You might say it's a defect that we've inherited from Adam hearts of stone. But God promises to change those hearts of stone to hearts of flesh. Jesus reclined at the table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples. And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners? But when he heard it, he said, those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means.

And this is a quote from Hosea. I desire mercy or steadfast love and not sacrifice. For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners. What does God do when he sees our heart problems?

Well, he doesn't shout at us. He doesn't get disgusted by us. He comes to us. Jesus, the great physician comes to heal our hearts. But we need to admit that we need his help.

The Pharisees didn't realize they had a heart problem. They were all about ritual and not relationship. But even to them, do you see Jesus gives an invitation even to them? He says, go and look it up in Hosea. Go and learn what this means. I desire mercy and not sacrifice.

In other words, go get an angiogram, look at the results of your heart and then come back because I've come not to call the righteous or the self righteous, but those who know that they're sinners. Have you looked at your heart honestly? Have you come to Jesus to be healed? Don't make the mistake of the exiles. Don't make the mistake of the Pharisees.

[27 : 32] Come to Jesus and have your heart changed before it's too late. How does Jesus fix our hearts? It's through his death on the cross. It's in him. Many of you I know have done that. You have hearts of flesh. Well, how then do we grow as Christians? How then do we live as a faithful city? It's easy to think, well, as a to grow as a Christian to live as a Christian, I need to do this and do that and not do this and not do that. That may be true. God does command us to obey him, but that obedience needs to come from the heart.

True change is heart change. Last thing change is heart change. We need to ask God not just to give us new hearts, but to keep renewing our hearts. That's also an important lesson if we're seeking to, whether we're seeking to grow as Christians or if we're seeking to disciple other people and disciple one another, we're called as a church, not to just be concerned about our own spiritual lives. We're commanded to be concerned about one another's spiritual lives. And there are times when we might need to tell people from God's word what they should and shouldn't do or point them to God's word, may children often need to be told what they should and shouldn't do because they're not old enough to understand heart motivation. But if we want lasting change, we need to address the heart. It's tempting just to focus on the doing. It's quicker. It gives faster results.

But if that's all we do, we'll end up just like exiled Israel, we'll end up just like the Pharisees, a veneer of religious rituals, but nothing in the heart. So as Jesus calls the Pharisees, he calls them whitewash tombs. It looks great on the outside, death on the inside. We need to real change as heart change. We need people who we can be honest with.

We need people who can walk beside us and not judge us, but together examine our hearts under the light of God's word. We need to together to ask God to help apply God's word, to help apply the gospel to our hearts. We need those honest relationships where we can keep planting the truth and weeding out the falsehood in our hearts so that together we can grow into a faithful city. So as a faithful city, we need to learn from our past mistakes, to learn the lessons from the exiles that God cares about our hearts. That relationship is more important than rituals, but most importantly, to look at the heart surgeon, to look to the heart surgeon, the one whose own blood was shed and flowed from his veins, whose own heart stopped beating so that we can have that life saving heart transplant. He is the great physician. Even now, he is transforming hearts by his word. He promises that his word will never return to him empty. And I pray that he hasn't tonight. And as God spoke at the beginning of Zechariah, he calls us to return to me and I'll return to you. That's a promise as we give our hearts to him, as we wholeheartedly give our hearts to him, he'll give himself to us and return and we'll grow closer to God. Let's pray.