

THE WRONG AND THE RIGHT OF WORSHIP

ZECHARIAH 7 - 8

We've been having a construction project in our sanctuary that started last July and is still underway. When we started it, we thought that it would be completed within a few short months, but it was not long before one delay after another began to crop up.

As we come to the books of Zechariah and Haggai, they were experiencing the same thing. These prophets lived in the days following the Babylonian Captivity. The Jews had been given permission to return to the land and to rebuild their temple and some of them came and started the work. But then delays cropped up. They had problems with their building permits and what looked to be a matter of months turned into a year and then two and then more. For a time, the work halted completely.

And then God spoke through these two prophets and their message motivated the people to renew their efforts. The building program got back on its feet. Progress began to be seen. As we come to chapters 7-8, the end is in sight. The Temple is taking shape. People are anticipating the celebrations that will soon be held.

It is in this context that the Lord raises a problem. It is not a problem with the physical construction. That is going well. The problem is not physical but spiritual. They have been looking at the issues of rebuilding and they have been looking at the rituals of worship and they need to look at the bigger picture as to why there needed to be a rebuilding in the first place and what is the reality behind their rituals.

SETTING FOR A SERMON

¹ Then it came about in the fourth year of King Darius, that the word of the LORD came to Zechariah on the fourth day of the ninth month, which is Chisleu.

² Now the town of Bethel had sent Sharezer and Regemmelech and their men to seek the favor of the LORD, ³ speaking to the priests who belong to the house of the LORD of hosts, and to the prophets saying, "Shall I weep in the fifth month and abstain, as I have done these many years?" (Zechariah 7:1-3).

The delegation comes to Zechariah with a question. It is a question about a ritual that parallels their worship. For the past 70 years, they have been observing a period of fasting and mourning on the anniversary of the destruction of the temple as well as on the day of atonement. But now the 70 years are almost up. The Temple is nearing its

completion. Should they continue observing this fast? Or should its observance be discontinued?

Instead of answering the question, the Lord tells them they are asking the wrong question. The issue is not whether they should practice this observance or that observance. There is a much bigger question. The question they should have been asking regarded the heart attitude behind their worship.

THE PROBLEM OF WRONG-WAY WORSHIP

⁴ Then the word of the LORD of hosts came to me saying, ⁵ "Say to all the people of the land and to the priests, 'When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months these seventy years, was it actually for Me that you fasted? ⁶ And when you eat and drink, do you not eat for yourselves and do you not drink for yourselves? ⁷ Are not these the words which the LORD proclaimed by the former prophets, when Jerusalem was inhabited and prosperous with its cities around it, and the Negev and the foothills were inhabited?'" (Zechariah 7:4-7).

They have been bemoaning the judgment of God that came upon them but, in all of that, their focus has been upon themselves and their own hardships rather than upon God against whom they sinned to bring the judgment in the first place.

They are like the criminal who is desperately sorry that he got caught, but who isn't all that concerned that he committed the crime in the first place.

They are like the drug addict who is concerned over the damage to his reputation when people found out about his lifestyle, but who isn't concerned about what led to that lifestyle in the first place.

At the root of their problem was that their ritual and their worship was self-centered instead of God centered. They entered their fasting and their prayers and their periods of mourning asking how they could have their "best life now" rather than how they could be pleasing to their Creator.

Their approach to God was to ask, "How can I get God to bless me?" rather than to ask, "How can I live in a way that is pleasing to the Lord?" Their view of God was that of a short order cook: "I'll have an answered prayer and a sixpack of blessings to go."

One of the regular complaints that people make about church (and I'm not just talking

about this church) is to say, “I am not getting out of it what I want.” Such a complaint misses the major point of what worship is all about. It isn’t about you. It is about God.

THE COMMAND TO RIGHT-WAY LIVING

8 Then the word of the LORD came to Zechariah saying, 9 “Thus has the LORD of hosts said, ‘Dispense true justice, and practice kindness and compassion each to his brother; 10 and do not oppress the widow or the orphan, the stranger or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.’” (Zechariah 7:8-10).

The Lord is not giving a new command. He is retelling the old command that He gave from the beginning. He says, “Here is what I told you to do in the first place. I told you to be good and to be kind.”

Jesus said the same thing. He said that the entire Old Testament Law can be summed up in two major points: Love God with everything you have and with everything you are and love your neighbor as yourself.”

Those two commands are linked. How you love God inevitably spills over into how you treat others.

There is a corollary here. When you start focusing on the outer ritualistic trappings of worship, it will not be long until you begin to ignore true justice and kindness and compassion. Or to put it another way, real worship leads to real living. If your worship only affects what you do on Sunday morning, then it isn’t real worship.

THE DANGER OF HARD HEARTED HEARING

11 “But they refused to pay attention, and turned a stubborn shoulder and stopped their ears from hearing. 12 And they made their hearts like flint so that they could not hear the law and the words which the LORD of hosts had sent by His Spirit through the former prophets; therefore great wrath came from the LORD of hosts. (Zechariah 7:11-12).

At this point there is a danger. The danger is that you hear the truth and do not put that truth into action in your life. That is the charge that God brings against His people. He says that they...

- *Refused to pay attention*
- *Turned a stubborn shoulder*
- *Stopped their ears from hearing*
- *Made their hearts like flint*

I used to play the guitar. Guitar strings are rather hard on your fingers and, if you play regularly, your fingers soon begin to develop calluses. These calluses are caused by the skin being repeatedly pressed against the hardness of the strings. It results in layer after layer of dead skin forming on the ends of your fingers.

There is nothing wrong with having calluses on your fingers. But there is something wrong with having calluses on your heart. That is what takes place when your heart is presented with God's truths and when you resist the change. At first, you can feel it pressing in. It calls you to obedience and sensitivity to God's will. But if you resist, it isn't so hard the next time. Or the next. And finally, there will come a time when you cannot feel it at all.

Everyone who listens to the word of God on a regular basis faces such a danger. It is a danger if you listen but do not apply. It is a danger if you resist. It is a danger of a hardened heart that builds up layers of resistance until you cannot feel the pressing of the presence of God.

It is for that reason, that Zechariah turns us to the promise of God's presence. If chapter 7 pointed out the problems of wrong-way worship, of practical living, and of a hardened heart, then chapter 8 points us to the solution to these issues. The solution is found in the promise of God's presence.

THE PROMISE OF GOD'S GRACIOUS PRESENCE

1. God Promises to Return to His People.

³ "Thus says the LORD, 'I will return to Zion and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem. Then Jerusalem will be called the City of Truth, and the mountain of the LORD of hosts will be called the Holy Mountain.'" (Zechariah 8:3).

When God promises to return to His people, that presupposes that He was once with them and that He left. That is the story of the Old Testament. The God who created heaven and earth entered time and space and spoke to Abraham, telling Him, "I will be your God and you and your descendants will be My people."

The Lord put this promise into practice in a very visual way when Moses constructed the Tabernacle according to the specifications that God had provided. When the Tabernacle was dedicated, the presence of God moved into the Tent of Meeting in the glory cloud. Later, when the Tabernacle was replaced by the Temple, the presence of God moved into the Holy of Holies.

But then, when the people of Israel sinned and went and worshiped other gods, the Lord responded in judgment. That judgment consisted His departure from the Temple. Ezekiel 10 gives a vision in which the prophet Ezekiel sees the presence of the Lord departing from the Temple. It goes out the eastern gate and out to the Mount of Olives and it disappears entirely. God has left the building. The Temple is subsequently destroyed by the invading army of Babylon.

Now we flash forward 70 years. The people are back in the land and they are rebuilding the Temple. But a Temple without the presence of the Lord is just an empty building.

Thus God promises that there is coming a day when He will return to His people and when He will dwell in the city with them. The presence of God is going to return.

Can I tell you the rest of the story? The people finish the Temple, thanks to the encouraging words of Haggai and Zechariah. They hold a dedication to the rebuilt temple and they offer up prayers and sacrifices and then they wait.

Nothing happens. No glory cloud. No movement. No manifested presence of God. What went wrong?

And so, the people wait. And they continue with their lives and their worship and they hold to the promise that God is going to come to His city and to His temple. And they wait. A year goes by. Another. Four hundred years.

And then, there is a commotion. A Galilean Rabbi comes into the Temple with a whip and a warning. Tables are overturned. Coins are clattering. "Make not My Father's House a house of merchants!" His Father's House? But though He comes speaking words of truth, those in the Temple want no part of it and He is betrayed and judged and nailed to a cross.

Within three days there are whisperings about. People are claiming to have seen the risen Jesus. Not just one or two or even twelve. Over five hundred make such a claim. The news begins to spread.

And then, when all Israel has gathered for the annual feast of Pentecost, all heaven breaks loose. There is the sound of a mighty rushing wind. Flames of fire appear hanging over the heads of the followers of Jesus. They begin to speak with a supernatural ability.

What has happened? God has come to His temple. But it is not merely the structure standing in Jerusalem to which God has come. He has come and indwelt His people. THEY are His temple. YOU are His temple. And we can say today that the presence of God is in this place as the presence of God is in you.

2. God Promises to Multiply His People.

⁴ "Thus says the LORD of hosts, 'Old men and old women will again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each man with his staff in his hand because of age. ⁵ And the streets of the city will be filled with boys and girls playing in its streets.' ⁶ Thus says the LORD of hosts, 'If it is too difficult in the sight of the remnant of this people in those days, will it also be too difficult in My sight?' declares the LORD of hosts. (Zechariah 8:4-6).

Zechariah pictures a day of peace and prosperity in which the city is filled with boys and girls playing in the streets. That wasn't the case in his day. The streets were desolate and empty. But that would change as God takes His remnant and begins a process of multiplication.

There would be in these prophecies both a "now and a not yet." On the one hand, Israel began to see a measure of multiplication in that day as the temple was rebuilt and Jerusalem was restored. On the other hand, the full ramifications of this multiplication is something that has seen its ultimate fulfillment in the church.

How did that multiplication process take place? It started with eleven disciples in an upper room. A hundred and twenty disciples on the day of Pentecost. That number has multiplied to become a great multitude, which no one can count, from every nation and tribe and peoples and tongues.

3. God Promises to Gather His People.

⁷ "Thus says the LORD of hosts, 'Behold, I am going to save My people from the land of the east and from the land of the west; ⁸ and I will bring them back, and they will live in the midst of Jerusalem, and they will be My people and I will be their God in truth and righteousness.' (Zechariah 8:7-8).

Zechariah was living in a day that had already seen a return of Jews to the land. But that return had only involved a remnant. It was the same sort of return that might take place if the news came out tomorrow that Castro had died and that Cuba was now engaged in democratic elections and permission was given for all exiles to return. Some might make the trip. But most would not.

Only a remnant had thus far returned. But God says there is more to come. Jerusalem would continue to grow and ultimately the gospel would go out from Jerusalem as God called together His people from the east and the west and from every nation under the sun — we call that gathering the church.

He has called us together to be a blessing.

4. God Promises to be a Blessing to His People.

11 'But now I will not treat the remnant of this people as in the former days,' declares the LORD of hosts. 12 For there will be peace for the seed: the vine will yield its fruit, the land will yield its produce, and the heavens will give their dew; and I will cause the remnant of this people to inherit all these things. (Zechariah 8:11-12).

The blessing of God was described in agricultural terms because it was an agricultural economy to whom the prophecy was addressed. Verse 12 summarizes that blessing — God would *cause the remnant of this people to inherit all these things*.

Today we see the more complete blessing as we are taught in Ephesians 1:3 that God *has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ*. I must point out that this is not a universal blessing. It is only a promise to those who are *in Christ*. It only works if you have come in faith to the One who died in your place upon the cross. It only works if you have come to rely on and to trust in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. Only then can you be said to be *in Christ*.

5. God Calls His People to be a Blessing to Others.

13 'And it will come about that just as you were a curse among the nations, O house of Judah and house of Israel, so I will save you that you may become a blessing' (Zechariah 8:13a).

The land and the people who had been under a curse were now to be made a blessing, not merely for themselves, but so that they could be a blessing to others.

That was always a part of the old covenant. God had said to Abraham, “I am going to bless you *and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed* (Genesis 12:3).

Of course, you cannot be a blessing to others unless you have first received the blessing of God yourself. You cannot give to others that which you have not received. Before you can be a blessing to others, you need to come to Christ in faith, trusting Him to be your Lord and your Savior and entrusting yourself to Him.

Once you have done that — once you have recognized Jesus as your Lord and Savior and received God’s blessing in your life — your obligation is to pass that blessing on to other people. You are blessed so that you can bless others. You are gifted so that you can be a gift to others. You are saved to serve.

How do you do that? One of the ways is by speaking the truth to one another.

16 'These are the things which you should do: speak the truth to one another; judge with truth and judgment for peace in your gates. 17 Also let none of you devise evil in your heart against another, and do not love perjury; for all these are what I hate,' declares the LORD." (Zechariah 8:16-17).

TJ pointed out to me this week something I had not realized. It is that the Greek translation of the phrase in verse 16: *speak the truth to one another* is quoted word for word in Ephesians 4:25 where Paul says: *Laying aside falsehood, speak truth, each one of you, with his neighbor, for we are members of one another.*

Paul takes the command given to the inhabitants of Jerusalem in Zechariah’s day and he applies those words to the church, telling us that WE ought to obey them, too.

We live in the day of the urban legend — it is a phenomenon that has been given new wings in this day of instant communication. I have made a resolve not to pass along such stories without checking up on their veracity to see if they are true. I was pleased to get an E-mail from John Mackay just the other day and he had taken special care to include a notation that he had checked the truth of a story before passing it along to others. That kind of attention to the truth is becoming to us all.

We should add that speaking truth is not merely the verbal avoidance of a lie. Speaking truth involves having what we say reflect a right world view. It involves speaking Christ. If we are not speaking of Christ to a world that does not know

Him, then it cannot be said that we are really speaking the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

I will be teaming with Tony Puentes starting in a week to teach a “how to” class out at Redeemer Bible College on speaking the truth of the Gospel. Those who do not feel comfortable sharing their faith with others usually have that discomfort because they have not been trained on how to do so and feel inadequate to the task. I urge you to take advantage of either that opportunity or, if your schedule does not allow that sort of commitment, perhaps to go to one of the elders or deacons or small group leaders in our church and ask if you might be taken under their wing and trained in the basics of how to share the gospel with someone who doesn’t know Christ.

THE WONDER OF RIGHT-WAY WORSHIP

I’ve entitled this sermon “the wrong and the right of worship” and perhaps you heard the title and thought that I was going to be talking about what we do on Sunday mornings. But worship is not limited to Sunday mornings. What we do throughout the rest of the week can and does have an impact on our Sunday morning worship experience.

Zechariah’s prophecy and his practical call to live lives of truth and grace as a result of God’s promises result in a right worship. This is seen in verses 18-19.

1. Sorrow will be Replaced by Gladness

*18 Then the word of the LORD of hosts came to me saying, 19
"Thus says the LORD of hosts, 'The fast of the fourth, the fast of the
fifth, the fast of the seventh, and the fast of the tenth months will
become joy, gladness, and cheerful feasts for the house of Judah; so
love truth and peace.' (Zechariah 8:18-19).*

Remember how this passage started. In the beginning of chapter 7, the people came and they asked Zechariah about their practice of fasting and mourning on the anniversaries of the Fall of Jerusalem and on Yom Kippur. Now we come full circle to answer that original question. The answer is that there is coming a day when...

- The fast will turn into a feast.
- Mourning will turn into rejoicing.
- Sorrow will turn into Joy.

Zechariah looks to a day when there will be feasting instead of fasting, rejoicing instead of fasting, and joy instead of sorrow. He looks to a time when God would dwell with His people. Dare I say it? He looks to the church today. We are there! The Lord is in this place! He calls us to His table and to a place of most intimate fellowship.

2. The Nations will Come

20 "Thus says the LORD of hosts, 'It will yet be that peoples will come, even the inhabitants of many cities. 21 And the inhabitants of one will go to another saying, "Let us go at once to entreat the favor of the LORD, and to seek the LORD of hosts; I will also go." 22 So many peoples and mighty nations will come to seek the LORD of hosts in Jerusalem and to entreat the favor of the LORD.' (Zechariah 8:20-22).

What Zechariah predicts as a future prophecy has seen fulfillment both in the ensuing years, but especially in our own day. It is true that there was a measure of fulfillment that began in his own day, but the larger fulfillment is seen today when many peoples and mighty nations have come to seek the Lord. The message of the gospel has gone out to the whole earth. There is today no nation where the word of the Lord is not spoken, yet it continues to go forth.

And you can be a part of that process. You can be involved in that dynamic in some very practical ways.

- (1) Small Groups starting next week (my own small group will be starting a week later). It is an excellent opportunity to come and to interact in a personal way.
- (2) Faith Promise commitment for the support of missionaries.
- (3) Join our Short Term Mission Trip this summer as it heads to Grenada.
- (4) For those of you who cannot afford such financial or time commitments, or for those who want to go a step beyond, take a brochure from the back table and resolve to pray for and to regularly write a letter or an E-mail to one or two or three of our missionaries.

You can enter into their ministry by being an encouragement to them as we go to another saying, *"Let us go at once to entreat the favor of the LORD, and to seek the LORD of hosts."*