

2. Feast, fast and the future of Zion

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A vaccine is a biological preparation that improves immunity to a particular disease. A vaccine typically contains an agent that resembles a disease-causing microorganism, and is often made from weakened or killed forms of its toxins. The agent stimulates the body's immune system to recognize the agent as foreign, destroy it, and "remember" it, so that the immune system can more easily recognize and destroy any of these microorganisms that it later encounters.

Vaccine helps people physically a great deal when it is done correctly. However, religious rituals can become a vaccine to the real relationship with Jesus Christ and make people think that they have a good enough religion that they don't need God.

I found this article sometime ago:

"Scripps Howard News Service profiled former lawyer James Kelley of Washington DC in 1997, one of a small group at his local church who are enthusiastic Episcopalians but who do not believe in God. Said Kelley, "We all love the incense, the stained glass windows, the organ music, the vestments and all of that. It's drama. It's aesthetics. It's the ritual. That's neat stuff. I don't want to give all that up just because I don't believe in God.""

Generally, Calvary Chapel is not considered as a religious denomination, but after all it is a man-made organization and it can turn into another silly denomination that becomes a worthless spiritual vaccine that keeps people from the rightful relationship with God.

In chapter 7 and 8, we find the Israelites are asking prophet Zechariah the wrong question and God responds with another question and a reminder for the future.

A. DID YOU DO IT FOR ME?

Zechariah 7:1-7 Now in the fourth year of King Darius it came to pass that the word of the Lord came to Zechariah, on the fourth day of the ninth month, Chislev, 2 when the people sent Sherezer, with Regem-Melech and his men, to the house of God, to pray before the Lord, 3 and to ask the priests who were in the house of the Lord of hosts, and the prophets, saying, "Should I weep in the fifth month and fast as I have done for so many years?" 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 during those seventy years, did you really fast for Me--for Me? 6 When you eat and when you drink, do you not eat and drink for yourselves? 7 Should you not have obeyed the words which the Lord proclaimed through the former prophets when Jerusalem and the cities around it were inhabited and prosperous, and the South and the Lowland were inhabited?'"

On December 4, 518 B.C. a delegation came to Jerusalem from the Jews in Babylon with a question about fasting. At this point, the temple was somewhere around halfway completed. The delegation and the people who still lived in Babylon wanted to know if they should continue their ritual of fasting on four occasions throughout the year. Fasting for what?

Originally, the Law of Moses only commanded one fast day, on the Day of Atonement – Yom Kippur – in Leviticus 16:29-34. In addition to this day, during the

exile the Jewish people added four more feasts to remember key dates in the tragic defeat of their nation. Here are the additional times of fasting:

- 4/17 Mourning the capture of Jerusalem
– Jeremiah 52:6-30
- 5/9 Burning of Jerusalem and the destruction of Solomon's Temple
– 2 Kings 25:2-10
- 7/3 Assassination of Gedaliah and the massacre of 80 men
– Jeremiah 4:1-10
- 10/10 Beginning of Nebuchadnezzar's siege against Jerusalem
– 2 Kings 25:1

Note one common thing about these dates, please. None of these dates has anything to do with the Lord. It is all about regretting and remembering their physical losses, not repenting from their sins that caused the fall of Jerusalem and the exile to Babylon. It is no wonder why the Lord was asking them if the fasting was done for Him.

No matter how beautiful the religious package is, our God sees through it. Nothing can be hidden from His sight. He not only sees what we do, but He also sees the motives of our behaviors and comments.

We must remember the definition of fasting at this point:

Fasting is voluntary abstinence from food to spend the meal time in prayer with mourning of repentance or intercession. Great examples of fasting can be found in Nehemiah and Daniel:

Nehemiah 1:4 So it was, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned for many days; I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

Daniel 9:3 Then I set my face toward the Lord God to make request by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes.

If we go through fasting on behalf of ourselves or others without repentance and intercession to the Lord, all it did was skipping a good meal for nothing. That was what these Israelites had been doing in Babylon for the last seventy years.

Instead of actively remembering the sin or tragedy of the past, God wants us to focus on active obedience and an active walk with Him. When He forgives and restores, the need for dwelling on the bitter past is over. Too many of us are always dwelling beside the graves of the dead past.

B. TRADITION AND TRADITIONALISM

At this point, I must speak about tradition and traditionalism.

Tradition is a useful and necessary social practice. It helps to tie generations together and keep society moving in a united way. Whether the traditions involve the way we eat and dress, how we treat our parents and family, the way we move from childhood into maturity, or the way we choose a job or a mate, tradition helps to stabilize things and guide us in making acceptable choices.

The danger of tradition is that it can easily turn into traditionalism. Tradition is the living faith of the dead, however, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. Traditionalism means going through the outward motions instead of honoring the

Lord from our heart. It means participating in a religious event but failing to have an inner spiritual experience in God.

When tradition becomes traditionalism, it starts to create problems, especially when the times change radically and people don't want to change with the times and start to insist their personal views to others over God's truth.

A couple of good examples are singing hymns or using KJV Bibles in churches. The older generation insists that everyone should use hymns and KJV Bibles by every Christian around the world. They forget that there are many true Christian brothers and sisters around the world who do not understand a word of English, let alone the 17th century English.

Those who think that singing hymns are the only way to approach God is wrong as well. They have a tendency to look down on others who sing praise and worship in different styles of music, such as pastor Jack Laverty who loves to do rap songs and elder Jerry Hamby who is really into a hard metal rock style praise songs.

They forget that the audience of our worship and praise is only One who is our God, not ourselves. Another thing they conveniently forget is that the tunes of the majority hymns were taken out of bar music during the time when the hymn lyrics were created.

Immature and legalistic people require religious rules and regulations to tell them what to do, and these regulations help them measure their "spiritual life." But God wants us to mature spiritually and grow from obeying rules to following principles and cultivating a vital personal relationship with Him.

Tradition should be a guide and not a jailer. It is easier to have a religion of habit than a relationship in the heart. Jesus reserved the harshest comments toward those who were religious.

Religion is made by humans to approach God. It makes humans be prideful for one's own accomplishment through one's religion. Humans want a religion in one's own terms to appease one's own spirituality. However, it has one draw back. It still leaves emptiness in one's heart no matter what humans do.

C. WHAT THE LORD WANTS

Zechariah 7:8-14 Then the word of the Lord came to Zechariah, saying, 9 "Thus says the Lord of hosts: 'Execute true justice, Show mercy and compassion Everyone to his brother. 10 Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, The alien or the poor. Let none of you plan evil in his heart Against his brother.' 11 "But they refused to heed, shrugged their shoulders, and stopped their ears so that they could not hear. 12 Yes, they made their hearts like flint, refusing to hear the law and the words which the Lord of hosts had sent by His Spirit through the former prophets. Thus great wrath came from the Lord of hosts. 13 Therefore it happened, that just as He proclaimed and they would not hear, so they called out and I would not listen," says the Lord of hosts. 14 "But I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations which they had not known. Thus the land became desolate after them, so that no one passed through or returned; for they made the pleasant land desolate."

Zechariah reminded the people of the way their forefathers routinely practiced their religion but failed to hear God's Word and obey it from their hearts. That was the

reason Jerusalem and the temple had been destroyed. God wasn't interested in their sacrifices and prayers so much as the obedience of their hearts.

Some among the people of God find it easier to fast a few days a year instead of truly treating others in a godly way. Their bad relationship with others demonstrate a fundamentally bad relationship with the Lord.

Micah 6:8 He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the Lord require of you But to do justly, To love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God?

When people do religious activities to satisfy and to appease their own religious feeling like many people around the world do, they themselves become the center of their own false faith, not God. It becomes idolatry, not true worship.

D. PROMISES CONCERNING ISRAEL

Zechariah 8:3-5 "Thus says the Lord: 'I will return to Zion, And dwell in the midst of Jerusalem. Jerusalem shall be called the City of Truth, The Mountain of the Lord of hosts, The Holy Mountain.' 4 "Thus says the Lord of hosts: 'Old men and old women shall again sit In the streets of Jerusalem, Each one with his staff in his hand Because of great age. 5 The streets of the city Shall be full of boys and girls Playing in its streets.'

God's people don't live on explanations; they live on promises. Faith and hope are nourished by the promises of God given to us in the Scriptures. In this chapter, Zechariah focused the people's eyes of faith on the future and shared some wonderful promises to encourage them.

According to President Obama's wonderful Health Care Reform law, our tax money will be used to kill unborn children, the end of elderly people's lives will be decided by a handful of non-medical bureaucrats. I am so glad that the Lord is coming back soon.

E. FASTING TO FEASTING

Zechariah 8:14-19 "For thus says the Lord of hosts: 'Just as I determined to punish you When your fathers provoked Me to wrath,' Says the Lord of hosts, 'And I would not relent, 15 So again in these days I am determined to do good To Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. Do not fear. 16 These are the things you shall do: Speak each man the truth to his neighbor; Give judgment in your gates for truth, justice, and peace; 17 Let none of you think evil in your heart against your neighbor; And do not love a false oath. For all these are things that I hate,' Says the Lord." 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 month, The fast of the fifth, The fast of the seventh, And the fast of the tenth, Shall be joy and gladness and cheerful feasts For the house of Judah. Therefore love truth and peace.'

God's covenant with Israel declared that He would punish them physically and materially if they disobeyed Him, but bless them if they obeyed Him. However, He has no such covenant with Christian believers today. He promises to meet all our needs. He blesses us that we might be a blessing to others. However, riches are no proof of God's special love, nor is poverty evidence that He's forsaken us.

In v18, the prophet clearly answered the question about the fasts. The day would come when Messiah would reign and all Israel's fasts would become feasts.

Isaiah 65:19 I will rejoice in Jerusalem, And joy in My people; The voice of weeping shall no longer be heard in her, Nor the voice of crying.

F. APPLICATIONS

- 1) Fasting without prayers of repentance and intercession means missing a perfectly good meal for nothing.
- 2) It is one thing to have a good tradition to love the Lord and His people, but if it becomes traditionalism in a legalistic way, it is best to dump that traditionalism for the sake of obedience to the Lord.
- 3) God's people don't live on explanations; but they live on His promises.