



Is Your Faith Fast or Feast?

BY DR. JERRY VINES

By the Book™ A Chapter by Chapter Bible Study Series from Jerry Vines Ministries
2295 Towne Lake Parkway • Suite 116 #249 • Woodstock, GA 30189

Let's Begin

We have all heard the idiom “feast or famine,” meaning

either too much or too little of something. But what most people do not know is that this expression was first recorded in 1732 and was originally “feast or fast.” It was not until the early 1900s that “famine” was substituted for “fast.” What many believers also do not know is that it is possible for our faith to be fast or feast. We see this truth in our study for today. Last week we saw how God gave Zechariah a series of night visions to encourage the Jews who had chosen to leave Babylon and return to Judah (Zech. 1:1–6:15). Through these visions, along with his contemporary Haggai, Zechariah led the people to finish the work of rebuilding the temple. One way Zechariah encouraged the people in the work was to remind them of the future blessings God had for them, their temple, and Jerusalem. These blessings included many prophecies about the Lord Jesus Christ.

In chapters 9 through 14 Zechariah will give more wonderful prophecies about the Lord Jesus Christ, including His second coming. But between the night visions and the closing visions or prophecies, we find a historical interlude (Zech. 7–8). This interlude takes place two years after Zechariah's night visions and after the temple had been rebuilt. At this point a delegation from the town of Bethel comes to Jerusalem. They come for two purposes. One is to pray, but the other is to ask the priests and prophets a specific question. As we use the outline below, we will see how Zechariah focuses on their question and why. We will also find out how our faith can be fast or feast.

I. Zechariah Exposes Their Hearts (7:1-7)

II. Zechariah Explains Their History (7:8-14)

III. Zechariah Expands Their Horizon (8:1-23)

I. Zechariah Exposes Their Hearts (7:1-7)

After giving the date for the interlude in verse 1, Zechariah shares the names of the delegation's leaders and the two purposes for their coming (cp. 7:2-3). Again, they came “to pray before the Lord” and to ask the priests and prophets a specific question. The question “... Should I weep in the fifth month, separating myself ... ?”

(7:3) They were asking if they needed to keep observing their fast days now that they were no longer in captivity. As far as we can tell, in the Law of Moses there was only one day in the year that God required the children of Israel to fast (cp. Lev. 16:29). It was the Day of Atonement, on which they remembered their sins and

looked forward to the coming of the Savior, who would make atonement for the sins of the world. But during their years in captivity the Jews had added additional fast days. In fact, in Zechariah 8 we are told that they had added four specific fast days in four different months (cp. 8:19). It was certainly appropriate for them to do so



during their days of the captivity because fasting is a time when we remember our sins and reflect on God's purpose for our lives. But now that the captivity was over, did they still need to fast?

The delegation's question seemed like an innocent enough question until we notice how they ended the question, "... these so many years" (7:3). Observing their fast days over the years had become an irksome burden to them instead of a religious exercise to bring them closer to the Lord. But it also brings before us an important question. It is the question of repetitive religious activities. An example is church attendance. At our First Baptist Church of Jacksonville, Florida, where I was pastor 24 years, we attended between two and four services a week. Another example is our daily devotional time. As we participate in these religious activities, have they become a ritual or are they a reality? Are they a burden or a blessing? Are they times of fasting or feasting? It is very important for us to understand the answer because it will greatly affect the religious things we do on a regular, repetitive basis.

The delegation may not have realized it, but Zechariah detected from their question that they had a heart problem. He could tell that their fasting had become a burden instead of a blessing to them. So, just as Jesus often answered a question with a question, Zechariah answers their question by asking them three different questions. Each question was meant to expose their

hearts and address the problem of repetitive religious exercises becoming a matter of formalism and traditionalism.

As we participate in these religious activities, have they become a ritual or are they a reality? Are they a burden or a blessing?

There is nothing wrong with form. We have to have some kind of form or our services would be utter chaos. This is why in 1 Corinthians 14:40 we are told, "Let all things be done decently and in order." When we have some kind of order in a church service, it is a form of worship. There is also nothing wrong with churches having traditions. The word "tradition" means "that which is passed along." Some traditions are important to be passed along. In 2 Timothy 2:2 Paul told Timothy, "And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also." Paul passed on the tradition of truth and wanted Timothy to do the same. So, there is nothing wrong with tradition. We are the beneficiaries of tradition.

The problem with form and

tradition is when they degenerate into formalism and traditionalism. This seems to have been what had happened to the Jews of Zechariah's day. This is why Zechariah's message from the Lord in verse 5 is, "... When ye fasted and mourned ... did ye at all fast unto Me, even to Me?" God was asking if they had fasted from their hearts. Were they fasting for Him or just for the sake of fasting? In verse 6 He next asks, "And when ye did eat, and when ye did drink, did not ye eat for yourselves, and drink for yourselves?" As their hearts are exposed, the Lord lets them know that He knew they had not been fasting for Him.

Notice how the Lord has Zechariah correct the problem. In verse 7 he asks, "Should ye not hear the words which the Lord hath cried by the former prophets ...?" He refers them back to God's Word to find out what it said about their fasting. They needed to understand that the Word of God must always take precedence over our traditions. This is true today. It's easy for churches to get attached to their traditions and routines; but if we are not careful, they will supersede God's Word. This is why we must always ask, "What does God say in His Word about this matter?"

Reflection Connection

In Matthew 15:1-9 Jesus addressed the problem of tradition becoming more important than the Word of God. Read Matthew 15:7-9 and discuss what the results of tradition can be.



II. Zechariah Explains Their History (7:8-14)

As Zechariah continues to answer the delegation's question, he gives them a historical review of what had happened to their ancestors. As he does, he shows them what the essence of real religion, or real faith, looks like. He first describes the path of reality. Look at verses 9 and 10 "Thus speaketh the Lord of hosts, saying, Execute true judgment, and shew mercy and compassions every man to his brother: And oppress not the widow, nor the fatherless, the stranger, nor the poor; and let none of you imagine evil against his brother in your heart."

Zechariah was saying here that the essence of real faith is how we treat other people. James said something very similar when he wrote, "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and keep himself unspotted from the world" (James 1:27). Real religion is a heart matter, and it affects how we relate to and treat other people.

The people's ancestors had been taught the essence of real religion, but in verse 11 we see how they had responded: "But they refused to hearken ..." When Zechariah says "... and they pulled away the shoulder" (7:11), he was giving the people a graphic picture of how bad

their fathers' rebellion had been. If you have ever seen a child defiantly pull away from his or her parent, you understand the picture Zechariah was giving them. Their ancestors both resisted and rebelled against the Lord.

Real religion is a heart matter, and it affects how we relate to and treat other people.

There was still more. Not only did the people's ancestors stop their ears "that they should not hear," verses 12 and 13 add, "Yea, they made their hearts as an adamant stone, lest they should hear the law, and the words which the Lord of hosts hath sent in His Spirit by the former prophets: therefore came a great wrath from the Lord of hosts. Therefore it is come to pass, that as He cried, and they would not hear; so they cried, and I would not hear, saith the Lord of hosts." Because they refused to hear their Lord when He repeatedly spoke to them through His prophets, He refused to hear them when they cried out to Him. This should be

The Bible says that there comes a time after God continually calls us and we refuse to hear that He turns away.

a sobering thought to everyone, especially to those living in rebellion to the Lord. The Bible says that there comes a time after God continually calls us and we refuse to hear that He turns away (cp. Prov. 1:24-33).

Verse 14 shows us the results of the people's rebellion. God scattered them like a whirlwind among the distant nations "... for they laid the pleasant land desolate." The people turned their dreamland, a land that was supposed to be flowing with milk and honey, into a wasteland. This is a reminder for us today that we also turn our life into a wasteland when we turn away from the Lord.

Reflection Connection

Read James 1:22-23 and discuss the importance of not only hearing God's Word but obeying it.



III. Zechariah Expands Their Horizon (8:1-23)

Because Zechariah wanted the people to understand real religion or faith, he next directs them toward the future as he seeks to expand their horizon. More than ten times in chapter 8 he says, "Thus saith the Lord ..." wanting the people to know that he was speaking the Lord's words. In verses 2 and 3 we read, "Thus saith the Lord of hosts; I was jealous for Zion with great jealousy ... I am returned unto Zion, and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem: and Jerusalem shall be called a city of truth; and the mountain of the Lord of hosts the holy mountain." While the delegation was focused on their fast days, God wanted them to get a vision of their future.

Don't forget that Zechariah was giving the Lord's message to Jews who had returned to their homeland after it had been ransacked and destroyed over seventy years earlier. Jerusalem did not look much like a city of truth or a place where God was in its midst. Yet, the people are next told, "Thus saith the Lord of hosts; There shall yet old men and old women dwell in the streets of Jerusalem ..." (8:4). Jerusalem was not very safe in Zechariah's day because of the Jews' surrounding enemies, but God was again expanding the people's horizon. He was promising the time that the city's elderly and even its little children will live safely in the city (8:5).

God was saying He had big plans for His people, the Jews, and their city of Jerusalem.

In verses 6 and 7 we read, "Thus saith the Lord of hosts; If it be marvellous in the eyes of the remnant of this people in these days, should it also be marvellous in mine eyes? saith the Lord of hosts. Thus saith the Lord of hosts; Behold, I will save My people from the east country, and from the west country." What the people were hearing had to be hard for them to believe, but God was reminding them that nothing is too hard for Him.

What the people were hearing had to be hard for them to believe, but God was reminding them that nothing is too hard for Him.

In verse 8 the Lord tells them, "And I will bring them, and they shall dwell in the midst of Jerusalem: and they shall be My people, and I will be their God, in truth and in righteousness." He was now predicting the

return or reassembling of the children of Israel as a nation and the day they will receive Jesus as their Messiah. Zechariah was prophesying this hundreds of years before the first coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In verse 12 Zechariah tells the people about the unbelievable material prosperity that was awaiting their nation. We know this material prosperity will be during the millennium when Christ reigns and the Jews are reinstated in the city of Jerusalem. In Zechariah's day all the surrounding nations believed Israel had been cursed, but God was again promising Israel future blessings and protection (8:13-15). Think about how encouraging this promise had to be to the Jews of Zechariah's day!

What were the people to do while they were waiting for the Lord's promises to come true? He tells them in verse 16, "These are the things that ye shall do; Speak ye every man the truth to his neighbour; execute the judgment of truth and peace in your gates." He wanted them to live on the basis of truth and peace. He was also taking them back to the essence of real religion or faith.

Remember, everything we have just read was in response to the delegation's question about keeping the different fast days



(cp. 7:3). Before answering this question, God has had Zechariah expose their hearts and explain their history. Finally in verse 19 they are ready for the answer. We read, "Thus saith the Lord of hosts; The fast of the fourth month, and the fast of the fifth, and the fast of the seventh, and the fast of the tenth, shall be to the house of Judah joy and gladness, and cheerful feasts; therefore love the truth and peace." What was the Lord saying? He was saying they needed to expand their horizons and understand that faith is primarily a feast and not a

fast. Think about it. When Jesus talked about salvation, He called it a supper (cp. Lk. 14:15-17; Rev. 19:8-10). As His children, we are invited to His banquet table. Again, our faith is to be a feast and not a fast.

In verse 23 the Lord has Zechariah close out the answer to the delegation's question by reminding them that they had a wonderful future. From their very beginning the Jews were supposed to be God's witnesses to the world, but they failed. Because of that, in Zechariah's day, and even today, the Jews have endured persecution and

ridicule. But the Lord was saying "in those days," because of Israel's blessings from the Lord and their witness to the nations of the world, the nations will want Israel's God to be their God.

Reflection Connection

Read Matthew 5:16 and discuss how this verse shows us that our faith is supposed to be so real that it is obvious and attractive to others.

Wrap Up

So, is our faith fast or feast? This really depends on what we are doing with our faith. If we are adding to it virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, godliness, brotherly kindness, and charity, as we are told to do in 2 Peter 1:5-7, our faith will "neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 5:8). Our faith will be a feast, and living for the Lord will be a joy and honor. But if we refuse to add or grow in our faith, our faith will become a fast (cp. 2 Pet. 5:9) and living for the Lord will be a burden and drudgery. If this has happened to you, take the time to examine your heart, confess your sin to the Lord, receive His forgiveness, and once again begin adding to your faith. As you do, your faith can once again be feast and not fast!

