

From Fasts to Feasts

Zechariah 7–8

Key Verse 8:19

“Thus says 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 seasons of joy and gladness and cheerful feasts. Therefore love truth and peace.’”

One of my sons used to say, “Daddy, I’m bored!” I sent him to summer camps. “I’m bored!” I let him play with his brothers in a kiddie pool. “I’m bored!” I sent him to his aunt’s house. Still, “I’m bored!” The interesting thing was that changing his circumstances never solved the problem. A new activity helped for a little while, but soon he was bored again. Many people approach their spiritual lives the same way. We think, “Maybe I need a different Bible study, different worship music, or a different ministry.” We assume that changing our circumstances will restore our joy.

In today’s passage, a group of Jews came to Zechariah with a question: “Should I weep and abstain in the fifth month, as I have done for so many years?” After seventy years of fasting and mourning, they were tired of the same religious rituals. They thought their problem was the fasting. But God knew their problem went much deeper. Instead of giving them a simple yes-or-no answer, the Lord exposed their hearts. Their real problem was not the fasting. Rather, their hearts had drifted from God. And in this passage, the Lord gives them a remarkable promise. He wants to restore their joy.

Joy comes not from changing our religious routines, but from returning to Him. It is found in God’s presence and in a restored relationship with Him. God alone can turn empty religion into joyful worship, fasts into feasts, and sorrow into joy. If any of us feel like a hamster running on a wheel, may the Holy Spirit bring us back to the joy of God’s presence and teach us this secret of joy.

Part I. Is It for You or for the Lord? (7:1–7)

Look at 7:2–3. A delegation from the people of Bethel approached the prophets and priests asking, “Should I weep and abstain in the fifth month, as I have done for so many years?” In the fifth month of 586 BC, the Babylonians breached Jerusalem’s walls, looted the temple treasures, and burned the temple to the ground. Hundreds of thousands of people were killed. Most of the survivors were subsequently exiled to Babylon, leaving only a small remnant behind (Jer. 52:12). After this unprecedented national tragedy, the remnant began to mourn in the fifth month for the loss of their temple. They had done so for seventy years. However, the temple was now being rebuilt (1:7; 7:1). The foundation had been laid, and the pillars and walls had been built. The temple would soon be completed (Ez. 6:15). Therefore, they felt that mourning the destruction of the temple was no longer necessary. Fasting in the fifth month only added to the exhaustion of rebuilding the temple.

How did the Lord God answer them? Look at verse 5: “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?’” His question was directed not only to the delegation, but also to all the people of the land, including the priests. Why? They all had the same problem. His counter-question exposed their motive: “Was it for me that you fasted?” God was not primarily concerned with their fasting. He was concerned with their hearts. Look at verse 6: “And when you eat and when you drink, do you not eat for yourselves and drink for yourselves?” The issue was not limited to fasting. The Jews also celebrated feasts such as Passover and the Festival of Harvest. Yet even those celebrations had become self-centered. To them, those feasts had become occasions to enjoy roasted lamb chops and drink rather than opportunities to honor God.

In Isaiah 1:14, the Lord lamented: “Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them.” Why did God hate them? Jesus gives us a similar example in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisee stood in the temple and prayed: “God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.” The Pharisee fasted, tithed, prayed, and worshiped. Yet Jesus did not commend him. Instead, He said: “For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” The Pharisee's religious life was centered on himself. He used spiritual activities to exalt himself rather than glorify God. God hates hypocrisy, self-serving religion, self-exaltation, and self-righteousness.

The same danger exists today. We may come to church because our parents expect us to. We may sing because everyone else is singing. We may serve because we want recognition from others. We may even attend worship looking to be entertained rather than to meet God. When worship becomes centered on ourselves instead of God, we lose the joy of serving Him. Self-serving religion, ritualism, and performance can easily trap God's people and rob them of true joy.

How then can we fast for God? The Apostle Paul says in 2 Corinthians 7:10, “For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.”

Since my brain surgeries years ago, I have struggled with double vision, pain, and numbness. Once I visited an elderly pastor. After hearing my concerns, he told me what Jesus had said to a half-paralyzed pastor during prayer: “Can you serve me with the other half that works?” Then he looked at me and said, “You look good and healthy!” I could not help but admit that much of my fear and sorrow came from unbelief and self-reliance. When I repented of my self-pity and self-reliance, I was able to seek God's help. The Lord Jesus says in 2 Corinthians 12:9: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore, I decided to depend on the power of Christ. When I focused on myself, my health problems produced worldly sorrow. But when I came

to Jesus, they were no longer merely problems. They became opportunities to experience His grace and power. Our Lord Jesus says: “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (Mt. 5:4).

Not only our fasting, but also our church attendance, Bible study, prayer, giving, and service should be for God. The Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:31: “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” Even the most ordinary tasks can become acts of worship when they are done by faith and for the glory of God.

Part II. Are You a Part-Time Christian or a Full-Time Christian? (7:8–14)

The path from fasts to feasts begins when worship stops being about us and becomes about God. But true worship cannot remain inside the temple. It must shape the way we live every day.

When the Jews came with their question, God's first response was, “Was it for me that you fasted?” Here is God's second response. Look at verses 9–10: “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.” Does God's instruction seem related to their question? Not really. They asked about fasting, but God exposed another problem that had robbed them of joy and made their worship empty. Many Jews claimed to love God by obeying His law. But the Lord saw something very different. Look at verses 11–12: “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.” Though they claimed to obey God's law, they neglected its weightier matters: justice, mercy, and faithfulness (Mt. 23:23). Their kings and judges failed to administer justice. They accepted bribes from the rich. The priests neglected the poor, widows, and orphans. While they maintained religious rituals, they ignored God's heart. As they rejected God, He gave them over to judgment and scattered them among the nations.

When they became weary in their religious life, the problem was not the fasting itself. They needed repentance more than they needed change. In the temple they appeared humble, holy, and righteous, but outside the temple they wore different masks. At work they deceived others. They neglected the poor and vulnerable. At home they failed to show grace and mercy. They were part-time followers of God. Such a half-hearted faith does not please God. He desires His people to be full-time followers—at church, at home, at school, at work, and even while driving. Worship on Sunday becomes hollow when it is not matched by love, integrity, and grace on Monday.

This kind of divided life not only displeases God, it also robs us of joy. We cannot enjoy close fellowship with God while knowingly ignoring His commands. James 1:27 says: “Religion that

God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”

God is not looking for part-time Christians. He desires hearts that belong to Him every day of the week. May God help us to live as full-time Christians in every aspect of our lives.

Part III. Who Can Turn Our Sorrow into Joy? (8:1–23)

Part I challenged us to examine why we worship. Part II challenged us to examine how we live. Now God addresses the deepest question of all: Who can turn our sorrow into joy?

After hearing God's two corrections, the delegation may have felt discouraged. They came with one question about fasting, but God exposed problems much deeper than they expected. Yet God does not expose our hearts to condemn us. He exposes them to heal us. Like a skilled surgeon, God removes the disease before restoring the patient. The Jews were grieving the destruction of the temple. Yet both they and God knew that rebuilding the temple was not their deepest need. Their deepest need was God Himself.

First, God restores His presence. Look at verse 2. The Lord Almighty reminded them of His never-changing character: jealousy. As we learned earlier, God's jealousy is not sinful envy. It is His passionate commitment to His people, like a husband's commitment to his bride. Then God makes an astonishing promise in verse 3: “I have returned to Zion and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem.” This is the turning point of the chapter. The temple was not the ultimate blessing. God's presence was. Earlier, because of Israel's sin, God's glory had departed from Jerusalem (Ezek. 10–11). But now God says, “I have returned.” His returning presence is the true beginning of restoration.

The result is remarkable. Jerusalem will become a faithful city and Zion a holy mountain. Elderly men and women will sit peacefully in the streets, while boys and girls play safely around them. What once was marked by destruction will be marked by peace, security, and joy. Does this promise sound impossible? Look at verse 6: “Should it also seem impossible to me?” declares the LORD Almighty. What is impossible with man is possible with God.

Many people think joy comes from changed circumstances. God says joy begins with His presence. The greatest gift God can give His people is not prosperity, success, or comfort. The greatest gift He can give is Himself.

Second, God renews His covenant. God's presence is followed by God's promise. Look at verses 7–8: “I will save my people ... and they shall be my people, and I will be their God, in faithfulness and righteousness.” These words echo the language of covenant. The Lord was not merely

rebuilding a city. He was restoring a relationship. The heart of biblical joy is not getting what we want. It is belonging to God.

Notice how often the covenant relationship appears throughout Scripture: “I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” That is the language of a faithful husband speaking to his bride. The Lord had not abandoned His people. He was renewing His commitment to them.

Because God had returned to them, they could be strong and continue building the temple. Their future no longer depended on their strength. It depended on God's faithfulness. The same is true for us. Our joy does not rest on our ability to hold on to God. It rests on God's faithfulness to hold on to us. Praise and thank God!

Third, God sends the One who finally turns sorrow into joy. In 8:19, God makes a remarkable promise: “The fasts ... shall be seasons of joy and gladness and cheerful feasts.” How can God make such a promise? How can mourning become celebration? How can sorrow become joy?

The answer is ultimately found in Jesus Christ. Isaiah 53:3-5 describes Him as: “A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.” God turns our sorrow into joy because His Son entered our sorrow first. Jesus carried our griefs and bore our sorrows. He was pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities. Through His wounds we are healed. Because Christ entered our suffering, we can come confidently to Him in ours. Hebrews 4:15–16 tells us that we have a High Priest who sympathizes with our weaknesses and gives us mercy and grace in our time of need. Even now, the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. He intercedes for us and works all things together for good for those who love God (Rom. 8:26–28).

As Christ fills His people with joy, others are drawn to Him. This is exactly what Zechariah foresaw. People from many nations would come seeking the Lord and joining His people. That promise began to be fulfilled at Pentecost when people from every nation heard the gospel and entered God's kingdom. One day it will be fulfilled completely. Revelation 7:9 describes a great multitude from every nation standing before the throne and before the Lamb. And Revelation 21:4 gives the final picture of God's promise: “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore.”

This is how God turns fasts into feasts. He returns to His people. He renews His covenant with His people. And He sends His Son to bear their sorrows and bring them everlasting joy.

In conclusion, we learned that true restoration begins with the presence of God and a covenant relationship with Him. As we walk with Him faithfully in every area of life, He transforms empty religion into joyful worship. This restoration is ultimately possible because of Jesus Christ, the Man of Sorrows, who bore our griefs and carried our sorrows. Through His wounds we are healed. And one day, when He returns, He will wipe away every tear, remove every sorrow, and make all

things new in His eternal kingdom. Let's praise God, who turns empty religion into joyful worship, fasts into feasts, and sorrow into joy!

What will you do with this secret? Will you continue looking for satisfaction in changing your circumstances, or will you return to God and find your joy in Him? May God bless us to draw near to Him, to walk with Him wholeheartedly, and to experience the joy He has prepared for us through His Son Jesus Christ. And may He help us share this hope with a sorrowful world.