

IV. Section Two – Zechariah’s Burdens

The prophetic burdens form the second primary panel in Zechariah’s prophecy (9:1-14:21). Like the night visions, this second panel is also introduced by an oracular section. But whereas the oracle that opened the night visions was single and brief (1:1-6), the one prefacing the burdens consists of a series of four distinct “words” from Yahweh which together form a compound oracle (7:1-8:23). Another difference between this oracle and the initial one is that this extended word from the Lord was provoked by a question posed by the people of the town of Bethel.

A. Introductory Oracles

Zechariah didn’t indicate any particular occasion for their question, but he did record that it came in 518 B.C. nearly two years after the night vision episode (7:1). That date is significant since work on the temple had recommenced in earnest in 520 B.C. (at the time of the night visions), and now that project was well underway. There would have been noticeable progress and the primary temple structure was likely in place. (The foundation had been laid and the walls partially constructed at the time the work resumed two years earlier; cf. 4:9 and 8:9 with Ezra 5:1-8.) Indeed, the temple would be finished within two years (516 B.C.; Ezra 6:14-15). So the particulars of the question itself seem to suggest that it was provoked by the marked success in the temple construction – success which reflected back on the Lord’s encouragement and promise through Haggai and Zechariah. These prophets had been spurring on the people with the assurance that Yahweh was with them and their labors would succeed, and now, with the temple taking shape and the work progressing without impediment or opposition, it certainly appeared that the Lord had indeed spoken to these two men. Even more, these happy developments may well have reinforced the Jews’ hopeful longing that Yahweh’s return and the restoration of Jerusalem and David’s kingdom were not to be long in coming.

1. The Inquiry Concerning the Fast of the Fifth Month

By all appearances, there was every reason for joyful expectation among the recovered exiles. The long years of subjugation and oppression in Babylon had come to an end and the completion of the Lord’s sanctuary was finally in sight. Zechariah pointedly reminded them that the Branch of David was the one appointed to build Yahweh’s house, but perhaps this meant that He would *finish* the work the builders had begun; could it be, then, that the restoration of David’s throne and kingdom was just around the corner? If so, then Yahweh’s return to His sanctuary was also imminent.

It’s impossible to know that these sorts of thoughts were running through the minds of the Jews back in Judea, but it’s certainly not far-fetched. There’s no doubt that their minds and hearts were filled with longing for Israel’s exile to end and the Lord to return to them and restore the glory and power of David’s kingdom. And that being the case, they’d have grasped at any favorable development or sign that their longing was soon to be satisfied. This anticipation seems to be reflected in the inquiry that came from the Jews in Bethel, for it raised the question of the propriety of continuing their weeping and fasting in the present days – that is, the practice of lamentation which befitted their exile and subjugation in Babylon under the Lord’s chastening hand.

- a. The first thing to consider is the *source* of the question. Zechariah noted that it was raised by certain individuals from the town of Bethel, but apparently on behalf of the larger populace (7:2; cf. v. 5). Here again, the prophet provided no explanation for why this inquiry came from that particular community; the text suggests that this mourning ritual was widely practiced in Babylon and it's inconceivable that every Jew who'd observed it there had found himself settling in Bethel upon his return to Judea. Why, then, did only that community raise the question? Certainly others would have shared the same concern.

Some have argued that *Bethel* refers to the sanctuary – the “house of God” – rather than the town (ref. KJV) and that this question was brought by men coming to Jerusalem from Babylon. The most obvious problem with this is that the Hebrew phrase *Beth-El* nowhere denotes the Lord's house in Jerusalem – not in Zechariah's prophecy and not in the entire Old Testament. The other problem is that this meaning is not supported by the context (ref. esp. 7:5a).

It seems clear that this inquiry came from the people of Bethel, but their concerns – and the Lord's response – pertained to all of the recovered exiles. Again, the progress on the temple building project likely provoked their question, and the Bethel community would have been aware of that progress because of the proximity of Bethel to Jerusalem. (Bethel is about 10 miles from Jerusalem.)

- b. The second consideration is the *practice* indicated in the inquiry. Evidently the observance of a pattern of ritual mourning was a widespread practice during the seventy-year period of the Babylonian captivity (7:5). This lamentation involved weeping and fasting (abstaining), both of which are powerful expressions of agonized mourning. The question mentioned only the fifth month in relation to this practice (7:3b), but the Lord's response referenced other fasts (mourning rituals) in the fourth, seventh and tenth months (cf. 7:5, 8:19). Zechariah provided no explanation for the narrow focus of the people's inquiry, highlighting once again that issues which were clear to the original audience are perhaps not so clear to later readers. Here as throughout the prophecy, the interpretive task involves entering the world and thought of Zechariah and his contemporaries.

- First, it's possible that the inquiry pertained to the act of ritual mourning as such, so that it wasn't necessary to identify all of the times of the year that this occurred. In this scenario, the question regarded the continuation of the *practice* of mourning; therefore, whatever the Lord's answer, it would pertain equally to all of the occasions of mourning.

- More likely, though, the reason for inquiring about the fifth-month fast is that it commemorated the destruction of the first temple. This event occurred in the fifth month of the year 586 B.C. (ref. 2 Kings 25:8-9). Thus the people's question likely focused on the fifth month because the impending completion of the new temple in Jerusalem suggested that the mourning ritual lamenting its destruction should now be set aside.

- This connection of the people's question with the temple project would also help explain why the other annual fasts were not mentioned. For each of those fasts had its own specific object related to the captivity and exile. Two pertained to Jerusalem's destruction and the third to an outcome of it: The tenth month fast recalled and mourned the beginning of the siege of Jerusalem while the fast of the fourth month mourned Nebuchadnezzar's breach of the city walls eighteen months later (2 Kings 25:1-4). The other fast in the seventh month lamented the murder of Gedaliah (the man Nebuchadnezzar appointed to rule over Judea as his vassal after he'd completed his siege and sacked Jerusalem) – and more importantly, the dispersion which followed (2 Kings 25:25; cf. Jeremiah 39-41).

The near completion of the second temple suggested the end of the fast of the fifth month which commemorated the destruction of Solomon's temple, but this state of affairs gave no such suggestion respecting the other three fasts. *For those fasts were times of mourning directed at Jerusalem's desolation and domination by Gentile power and these circumstances had not been redressed.* Jerusalem yet lay in ruins and the Persian king Darius ruled over it. True, he'd authorized the temple's reconstruction and provided security and resources for the project, but he'd done so as the head of the indomitable Gentile occupying power.

- c. Evidently the people of Bethel had been debating whether or not they should continue their ritual mourning for the temple in light of their happy expectation that the new one under construction would soon be finished. Clearly Yahweh was granting His people favor in this endeavor; indeed, He'd sent His prophets Haggai and Zechariah to assure them that He was with them and would give them success. The destruction of the temple marked Yahweh's departure and rejection of Judah; didn't the present developments signal His restored favor and imminent return? How, then, could His people continue to mourn over His sanctuary?

Ending the fifth-month fast seemed appropriate, but the people of Bethel felt it necessary to seek the Lord's leading in this decision. After all, their mourning and fasting weren't concerned with a building as such, but with the sanctuary of Yahweh, their covenant God. Thus they appointed men to travel to Jerusalem to inquire of the Lord's priests and prophets (7:2-3). Obviously Zechariah was one of those prophets, and the Lord was pleased to issue His reply through him (7:4).

- d. The fact that the people of Bethel sought Yahweh's instruction is very telling. In their minds, their ritual mourning was about Him and their relationship with Him. In other words, they regarded these solemn occasions as times of *worship*; when they wept and abstained from food they believed they were doing so out of devotion to the Lord and concern for His glory and honor in Israel and in the eyes of the world. Again, each of the four fasts had its own object of commemoration related to the Babylonian conquest, captivity and exile. *And yet, all of them were expressions of a common psychological and spiritual orientation.* That is, they all reflected the same thinking and perspective on the part of the Jewish exiles.

- First and most obvious, these times of formal mourning and fasting were a way for the people to give tangible expression to their longing and the agony of their suffering which had come upon them at the Lord's hand.
- But it's also evident that the exiles intended their mourning to demonstrate that they recognized their woeful circumstances as both self-inflicted and just. They saw their mourning as signifying their repentance toward God.

These ritual lamentations gave expression to the Jews' suffering and sorrow, but the context suggests that their larger goal – as they saw it – was to give voice to their penitence: *Their fasts were an occasion to demonstrate to Yahweh – their covenant God who'd departed from them and set Himself against them – that they acknowledged their guilt and the fact that their plight was of their own doing. They hoped by their mourning and fasting to show Him that they had learned their lesson and that He, in turn, would arise on their behalf and restore what had been lost.*

Recognizing this dynamic is critically important because it is the key to understanding the Lord's response to the people's inquiry. They sought His counsel regarding continuing their mourning and fasting; He didn't answer their inquiry, but instead spoke to the issue with which they ought to be concerned.

2. The First Oracle – The Rebuke of Israel's Hypocrisy

The representatives from Bethel brought their inquiry to the priests and Zechariah and Haggai and these men evidently lifted it to the Lord. He responded with a word to *all the people* including the *priests*, but not a word they expected to hear. Rather than answering the question they raised – the question of continuing their ritual mourning, Yahweh confronted them with their true motivation in it. Not willing to be drawn aside to peripheral matters, He was determined to address the real issue. (So it would be with His Son centuries later – cf. Mark 2:1-5; Luke 13:22-30; John 3:1-3, 8:1-7; etc).

- a. The people of Bethel were questioning continuing their annual fast for the sanctuary; Yahweh answered their question with some questions of His own, the heart of which was this: *Who are your lamentations really about? Who is the actual object of your concern in your sacred exercises?* As noted above, the children of Israel – priests as well as people – believed that their God was their concern in their ritual mourning and fasting; His response shows that He wasn't buying it. Thus His first question back to them (drawing out the Hebrew emphasis): *"In your fasting, did you **really** fast with respect to Me – **Me**?"* (7:5).
- b. His second question might appear to have shifted the subject (7:6), but it actually reinforced the point indicated by the first one. And it did so in an interesting way. After asking the people and priests if their fasting was really about Him, Yahweh challenged them to consider that their eating and drinking – in other words, their lives outside their times of ritual fasting and mourning – were concerned with themselves. These two questions act in parallel to make a profound point.

Most simply, the Lord was directing them to recognize that every aspect and component of their lives had the same orientation and object of concern. If He had stopped with His first question, it would have been easy for the people to reply with what they perceived about themselves: Of course their mourning and fasting were about Him. But His second question forced them to reconsider that answer. Taken together, the two questions highlighted the truth that the motivation and concern they had in their eating and drinking – in their everyday lives when they were not fasting – were the same ones they brought to their ritual mourning. The concerns that preoccupied them in their daily lives were the same concerns that drove their sacred exercises – their times of conscious worship.

No doubt many among the exiles had come to recognize that Israel's national calamity was the result of their rebellion against their God. They saw their ritual fasts in Babylon as an occasion, not only to express the agony of their situation, but to acknowledge their guilt to the Lord and seek His mercy and favor. *But He wanted them to see that self-concern was the true impetus behind their mourning.* What they really sought in their lamentation and petition was deliverance from their suffering and the recovery of Israel's former "glory days" when all seemed well and life was settled and comfortable.

And what was true of their past mourning over the temple was true of their present joy and anticipation: Their exultation regarding the new temple was grounded in what they expected its completion to mean for them and their nation. The people of Bethel wanted to know if Yahweh would have them cease their mourning in light of the temple's rebuilding. Shouldn't they now rejoice rather than mourn? But His reply was that it made no difference: *Both responses were equally displeasing to Him because both reflected the same underlying concern – a concern centered in themselves, not Him.*

- c. Release from captivity and restoration to Judea hadn't changed a thing. The hearts of God's covenant people remained the same as they were when they were captive exiles in Babylon. Indeed, their hearts remained unchanged from the time long before the destruction of Jerusalem and its sanctuary. Whether in their desolation and captivity or previously in the full glory of David's kingdom, the hearts of Yahweh's sons had always been far from Him. Thus His third question: *"Aren't My words to you today the very words My prophets confronted you with throughout the centuries when David's kingdom was glorious and prosperous and the whole land – even the barren Negev – was filled with inhabitants?"*

The implication is clear. Yahweh had been confronting the same fundamental issue from the beginning: Israel was an unbelieving and unfaithful "son" and needed to repent and return to Him. That was the case during the glory days of David's kingdom and it remained so during the seventy-year captivity in Babylon through to the present day as the exiles stood inquiring of the Lord in Jerusalem.

Thus the first oracle acted to reorient the people's thinking. Yes, Yahweh had restored them to the land and was overseeing the rebuilding of the temple. But this didn't call for an end to mourning; *rather, it called for a new and true mourning* – mourning that reflected hearts that had returned to their God even as He was going to return to them.