

Fasting In Sorrow--Feasting In Joy

by Steve Zeisler

Isaiah prophesied that Messiah to come would be "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief." (Is. 53:3) The gospel records of Jesus' life certainly illustrate the truth of that prediction. It is impossible to read the accounts of Jesus' life and not be struck by the lonely humility that characterized his years on earth. Of himself, Jesus said, "The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." (Luke 9:58) He wept at the grave of his friend Lazarus; he lamented over Jerusalem. Yet he turned the thinking of the human race upside--down by pronouncing a blessing for those who mourn, a blessing for those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, a blessing for those who are poor in spirit.

The central symbol of the Christian faith is an executioner's device, a cross on which criminals were put to death. If we Christians are going to be realistic about our faith we need to look seriously at human sorrow, to seek to understand it and face it as Jesus faced it. As his followers let us consider seriously our mourning, our fasting, our sorrow. Let us not be glib and shallow in thinking about those things.

Chapter seven of the book of Zechariah will lead us into a consideration of these issues this morning. Here we read that a delegation came to the prophet with a question on fasting. Zechariah 7:

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 Chislev. Now the town of Bethel had sent Sharezer and Regemmelech and their men to seek the favor of the Lord, 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?" Then the word of the Lord of hosts came to me saying, "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? And when you eat and drink, do you not eat for yourselves and do you not drink for yourselves?"

During their seventy years' captivity in Babylon, the Jews observed four days each year which recalled events that had occurred during the siege and destruction of Jerusalem. In chapter 8, verse 19, all four of these days are mentioned; ". . . the fast of the fourth, the fast of the fifth, the fast of the seventh, and the fast of the tenth months." These days recalled, first, the day Jerusalem was set about by armies; second, the day the walls were breached; third, the day the temple was destroyed; and fourth, the day one of the Jewish leaders was killed by the Babylonians. When the anniversaries of each of these days came around, the exiled Jews recalled the horror of them and the sorrow of them and set aside a day to fast. So the question now arises, following their return to the land and their involvement in rebuilding the temple, "Should we continue to fast? Should we continue to remember those sorrowful days?"

In responding to this reasonable, logical question, Zechariah takes the opportunity to address to the whole nation some important truths about real worship, about real, internal responsiveness to God. To their question about fasting he links together a word about their feasting; in verse 5 the prophet asks about their fasts, while in verse 6 he asks about their feasts, so that both of these concepts are wedded together in his thinking. Zechariah begins his answer by relating the Lord's penetrating question to the delegation and, by extension, to the whole people: "Was it actually for me that you fasted all those years? And when you eat your feasts, who is it for really? Isn't it really for yourselves, not for your Lord, that you carried out the routine of worship, assembly and discussion? Was it for me that you fasted? Was it because of your sorrow over my broken heart, over my loss of honor among my people, over the effrontery of the rebels? Was it for me that you fasted?" is his question. The rest of chapter 7 speaks directly to this question of a fast, and then in chapter 8 he turns the discussion around and talks about feasting.

So, recalling the question, "Was it for me that you fasted?" let us read on:

" '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?' " Then the word of the Lord came to Zechariah saying, "Thus has the Lord of hosts said, 'Dispense true justice, and practice kindness and compassion each to his brother; 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.' But they refused to pay attention and turned a stubborn shoulder and stopped their hearts from hearing. 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. And it came about that Just as He called and they would not listen, so they called and I would not listen," says the Lord of hosts; but I scattered them with a storm wind among all the nations whom they have not known. Thus the land is desolated behind them, so that no one went back and forth, for they made the pleasant land desolate.

Here Zechariah is talking about the prophets who had preached to the nation before Israel was overrun by the Babylonians, those earlier prophets who reminded the Jews again and again of the concerns of God. But, Zechariah says, they turned a deaf ear to all that; they refused to listen. Their hearts became like flint (verse 12), and finally God acted in judgment and desolated their land.

The thing that should strike us about verse 14 is sorrow and regret over the effects of sin, anguish over the judgment of it, and the hurt we suffer when our sin finally has had its way: "I scattered them with a storm wind among all the nations . . . Thus the land is desolated behind them, so that no one went back and forth, for they made the pleasant land desolate" (verse 14). We can imagine the Jews in captivity, looking back at their once pleasant land and seeing that Jerusalem had been burned, fasting in great sorrow for the judgment that had come upon them. But there is a much more serious desolation described in these verses, the desolation in the hearts of the people, described in verse 12: "They made their hearts like flint so that they could not hear the law and the words which the Lord . . . sent by his Spirit." That is what they should have mourned and fasted over, their hardened hearts, their high-handed rebellion, their refusal to be softened toward God and changed by his word.

Recently a friend told me about the pastor of a church in a small community who was arrested for drunk driving. The church was upset and scandalized by this. They were horrified by being so publicly embarrassed. But the more we talked, the more I became aware that the issue should not have been scandal or embarrassment over the exposure of the sin of their pastor, rather it should have been sorrow over the hypocrisy of a leader who was involved in practices that were dishonoring to God, and sorrow over a loveless congregation that would not allow their hurting pastor to admit to his problem and seek help. As in this incident in Zechariah, this congregation's anguish of heart ought to have been over the sin, not the scandal. The anguish which the Jews felt over the destruction of Jerusalem should have been for their rebellion, not for the judgment they suffered. That is exactly the point of Zechariah's question, "Was it for me that you fasted? Was it because of the affront to God that you fasted? Was it because of the shame that his name bore when his people rebelled? Or did you fast because Jerusalem was burned, you were exiled, and you didn't like the consequences?"

At Peninsula Bible Church we have a yearly calendar of events. At the moment we are in "retreat season." Last week we had the college retreat, this week--end was the men's retreat, while next week is the women's retreat. Coming up in the spring we will have our Good Friday Service and the Easter Sunrise Service, those wonderful times when we focus on Jesus' death and resurrection. In the summer we have our annual Family Faire, that time of learning together as families. In the fall many look forward to our Harvest Offering and a Thanksgiving Day Service, and at Christmas time our Christmas musical. We have the same calendar of events year after year. It might be worth asking ourselves to think about 1982. Was it for the Lord that you attended Family Faire, when you learned lessons and considered issues involving your family? Was it for the Lord that we sang the Easter hymns? Was it for the Lord that we shared together on New Year's Eve? "Was it for me?" asks the Lord, that our calendar of events, our routine, our choices were made during 1982? As far as mourning is concerned, do we feel remorse and anguish over our sin? Do we grieve because of what God has

to suffer on our behalf? Do we hurt over the damage we have done to his name and reputation? Do we hate the rebellion that so often guides our thinking and our experience?

Let us look at the specific commandments Zechariah gives by which his hearers ought to examine themselves. "Dispense true justice," he says, recalling the former prophets, "practice kindness and compassion each to his brother. Do not oppress the widow or the orphan, the stranger or the poor. Do not devise evil in your hearts against one another." In one respect we might say that this examination is the easiest one the prophets could have given us. If we are going to have to look at what kind of people we are, the easiest thing would be to focus on how we treat other people. Jesus said, "The law can be summed up by two great statements: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself." If we have any hope of succeeding when we face the law, clearly the easier assignment is to consider how we treat each other. We fail abjectly when it comes to loving the Lord, but there is some human kindness occasionally apparent among us. (Even non--Christians are capable of loving actions and compassion at times.) So although the easier test is given, yet how miserably we fail it. How uncaring and uncompassionate we are; how insulated we are from the poor, the orphans, the widows, the needy; how we insulate ourselves from having to even discover the needs of others around us. The fact that we fail the easier test ought to be to our great sorrow. There ought to be genuine, spiritual fasting that we so fail; there ought to be genuine remorse at the kind of people we are, remembering Jesus' words, "Blessed are those who mourn."

In chapter 8 the focus is 180 degrees in the other direction. Instead of a dirge being played in a minor key by a mournful organ, a joyful trumpet sounds as God ceases talking about sorrow, fasting and hurt over sin, and directs his attention to joy and redemption. Here God begins to talk about what it will be like when his people are redeemed, what it will be like on the day when fasting is turned to feasting. This is a tremendous picture of God's redemptive work.

As we go on to consider some of these things, let us remember that although the book of Zechariah is about the nation of Israel, in this series we have been applying to the Christian church the lessons we have learned. Zechariah's magnificent word pictures are drawn in the context of the nation of Israel and the city of Jerusalem--we should not lose sight of the fact that this is a prediction about Israel--but remember that the apostle Paul said that we Christians are a branch which has been grafted into the root of Israel; the very same concerns of God, the same purposes, the same rhythms, the same patterns that God put Israel through as a nation hold for us as his church. It is legitimate therefore for us to apply these words and predictions to our own experience.

Let me note just three of Zechariah's beautiful word pictures. First, verses 4 and 5:

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. And the streets of the city will be filled with boys and girls playing in its streets."

The deep desire to see loving, caring, successful families and communities is universal and inescapable. That desire is as old as man himself. You cannot talk to friends and neighbors, you cannot look at your own life and longings and not feel that desire well up within you. How deep is our wish to see love carry over across the generations, to see grandparents and great-grandparents lovingly pass on to other generations what God has taught them. How deep is our desire to have safe communities, where there is joy and gladness and freedom, where there is no fracturing, anger, disappointment and dislocation and all the other things that foul up families and communities in our world. In talking about God's promise to bless, Zechariah here says there is coming a day when people who are so old they cannot stand up without their staffs will look out and see a generation of children playing in the streets in freedom and love. This "Walton's Mountain" experience in the Lord will be a thing to behold! What a magnificent picture of God's redeeming work!

The second word picture is in verse 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."

This picture drawn by the pen and the voice of Zechariah speaks to something else that is deep within us, another of our human longings, and that is the desire that man and the physical world be in harmony again. Every day we hear about the damage being done to the ecology. about what we should do to save the wilderness areas and somehow keep human enterprise from ruining what is left of the beautiful earth that God gave us to live on. Every one of us has seen some majestic piece of God's creative work and felt hurt that man was so out of step with the planet. Zechariah is saying that the day is coming when everything will work as God originally planned. This will reverse the curse imposed on Adam's toil: "You will plant and thorns and thistles and frustration will come up; you will work by the sweat of your brow and you will be frustrated every hour at trying to make things work right." Here Zechariah is saying that there is coming a day when everything will work together in harmony.

The third picture is in verse 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. Do not fear; let your hands be strong. "

Finally, the people of God will lead the rest of humanity in bringing about peace and restoring order, harmony and delight among the nations of earth. Throughout history, the Christian church frequently has been the very cause of the problems of warfare, hatred, etc. Rather than being a blessing we often are a curse; we contribute to the problems rather than to the solutions. But the day is coming when God's people will in his name lead the rest of the nations into harmony. Here is another of our deep natural desires which Zechariah sees fulfilled.

Verse 14 begins a paragraph where we will find a listing of God's law, of God's concern, which is very similar to the one we read earlier in verses 9 and 10 of chapter 7. In that section where the Lord was speaking about the fasting, the failure, the mourning of his people, the listing of law became the standard that measured failure. Here in chapter 8, where he has turned the tables and has redeemed his people, a similar list becomes a joy--filled challenge to live out the things God wants his people to do:

"For thus says the Lord of hosts, 'Just as I purposed to do harm to you when your fathers provoked Me to wrath,' says the Lord of hosts, 'and I have not relented, so I have again purposed in these days to do good to Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. Do not fear! These are the things which you should do: speak the truth to one another; judge with truth and judgment for peace in your gates. 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."

There is coming a day when God's expression of what he loves we will love and what he hates we will hate. We will act on what God calls us to do rather than fail in his command for our belief and behavior.

Then in verse 18 the Lord makes the explicit point that we have been referring to all along, and that is that the feasting that these people enjoy results directly because of the sorrow they were called to experience. It is the same point that Jesus made. "Blessed are those who mourn..." Blessed are those whose mourning is realistic, whose hatred of sin is genuine, whose anxiety over their rebellion is deeply felt. "... For they shall be comforted." Those whose fasting is real will one day experience feasting in its place; on the days they once fasted they will one day feast. That is his prediction, beginning in verse 18:

Then the word of the Lord of hosts came to me saying, "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.' Thus says the Lord of hosts, 'It will yet be that peoples will come, even the inhabitants of many cities; 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." So many peoples and mighty nations will come to seek the Lord of hosts in Jerusalem and to entreat the favor of the Lord.' Thus says the Lord of hosts, 'In those days ten men from the nations of every language will grasp the garment of a Jew saying, "Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you. " ' "

Naming our moral failure for what it is and mourning over that brings about God's redemptive work so that we become joy--filled. That work of redemption is so attractive there is nothing that can replace it or rival it. There is nothing more attractive than a joy--filled person. We can well imagine someone grabbing the garments of one who is filled with joy, seeking to find out what it is that sets him apart

Writing on this kind of joy, Eugene Peterson says,

We come to God (and to the revelation of God's ways) because none of us have it within ourselves, except momentarily, to be joyous. Joy is a product of abundance; it is the overflow of vitality. It is life working together harmoniously. It is exuberance. Inadequate sinners as we are, none of us can manage that forvery long.

We try to get it through entertainment. We pay someone to make jokes, tell stories, perform dramatic actions, sing songs. We buy the vitality of another's imagination to divert and enliven our own poor lives. The enormous entertainment industry in our land is a sign of the depletion of joy in our culture. Society is a bored, gluttonous king employing a court Jester to divert it after an overindulgent meal. But that kind of joy never penetrates our lives, never changes our basic constitution. The effects are extremely temporary--a few minutes, a few hours, a few days at most. When we run out of money, the joy trickles away. We cannot make ourselves joyful. Joy cannot be commanded, purchased or arranged.

On the day when the people of God have their fasting replaced by feasting, on the day when the heartfelt sorrow that is proper for them is replaced by the honor given to them by God, they become joyful, they will dance with gladness, and the whole world will be attracted to that. Jesus said that mourning and comfort are related. Blessed are those who hate their sin, who mourn for it, because ultimately it is they who will feast, who will be comforted, who will be made glad.

The question asked by Zechariah at the beginning of his address to the people concerned self--examination about their feasts and their fasts: "Was it for me all those years?" For us too that question is valid: "Was it for me?" Is our Christian service, our Christian enterprise, centered on the Lord or on something else? Was it for him that you faced all those things and worshipped as you did? "Was it for me?"

Lord, we so are thrilled at the prospects of joy. Even the prophet's pictures are inadequate to describe the brim--filled life, the delight, the gladness, the closeness, the sense of approval and purpose. What a magnificent redemption to know that the years of ashes and destruction the fasting, the desolation will be replaced by feasting and dancing. Lord, we remember your words that it is those who mourn that will be comforted, that if we are foolish and shallow about our sorrow over sin, that if it was not for you that we fasted these years that our joy in [act will correspond in its shallowness. We are anxious to be made the kind of people who are honest with ourselves, who face what we are and repent of it and be changed of it. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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[Back to Index Page](#)

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