

CHAPTER 7

We have done with the visions, but not with the revelations of this book; the prophet sees no more such signs as he had seen, but still “the word of the Lord came to him.” In this chapter we have,

I. A case of conscience proposed to the prophet by the children of the captivity concerning fasting, whether they should continue their solemn fasts which they had religiously observed during the seventy years of their captivity (v. 1-3).

II. The answer to this question, which is given in this and the next chapter; and this answer was given not all at once, but by piece-meal, and, it should seem, at several times, for here are four distinct discourses which have all of them reference to this case, each of them prefaced with “the word of the Lord came,” (v. 4-8 and 8:1, 18). The method of them is very observable. In this chapter,

- 1.** The prophet sharply reproves them for the mismanagements of their fasts (v. 4-7).
- 2.** He exhorts them to reform their lives, which would be the best way of fasting, and to take heed of those sins which brought those judgments upon them which they kept these fasts in memory of (v. 8-14). And then in the next chapter, having searched the wound, he binds it up, and heals it, with gracious assurances of great mercy God had yet in store for them, by which he would turn their fasts into feasts.

~~301~~ ZECHARIAH 7:1-7

AN ENQUIRY CONCERNING FASTING

This occasional sermon, which the prophet preached, and which is recorded in this and the next chapter, was above two years after the former, in which he gave them an account of his visions, as appears by comparing the date of this (v. 1), in the *ninth month* of the *fourth year* of Darius, with the date of that (~~301~~ Zechariah 1:1), in the eighth month of the second year of Darius; not that Zechariah was idle all that while (it is

expressly said that he and Haggai continued *prophesying* till the temple was finished in the sixth year of Darius; ^{<3164}Ezra 6:14, 15), but during that time he did not preach any sermon that was afterwards published, and left upon record, as this is. God may be honoured, his work done, and his interest served, by word of mouth as well as by writing; and by inculcating and pressing what has been taught, as well as by advancing something new. Now here we have,

I. A case proposed concerning fasting. Some persons were sent to enquire of the priests and prophets whether they should continue to observe their yearly fasts, particularly that in the fifth month, as they had done. It is uncertain whether the case was put by those that yet remained in Babylon, who, being deprived of the benefit of the solemn feasts which God's ordinance appointed them, made up the want by the solemn fasts which God's providences called them to; or by those that had returned, but lived in the country, as some rather incline to think, because they are called the *people of the land*, v. 5. But, as to that, the answer given to the messengers of the captive Jews might be directed, not to them only, but to *all the people*. Observe,

1. Who they were that came with this enquiry — *Sherezzer and Regem-melech*, persons of some rank and figure, for they came *with their men*, and did not think it below them, or any disparagement to them, to be sent on this errand, but rather an addition to their honour to be,

(1.) Attendants in God's house, there to do duty and receive orders. The greatest of men are less than the least of the ordinances of Jesus Christ.

(2.) Agents for God's people, to negotiate their affairs. Men of estates, having more leisure than men of business, ought to employ their time in the service of the public, and by doing good they make themselves truly great; the *messengers of the churches* were the *glory of Christ*, ^{<4023}2 Corinthians 8:23.

2. What the errand was upon which they came. They were sent perhaps not with *gold and silver* (as those, ^{<3160}Zechariah 6:10, 11), or, if they were, that is not mentioned, but upon the two great errands which should bring us all to the house of God,

(1.) to intercede with God for his mercy. They were sent to *pray before the Lord*, and, some think (according to the usage then), to *offer sacrifice*,

with which they offered up their prayers. The Jews, in captivity, prayed towards the temple (as appears ^{<276>}Daniel 6:10); but now that it was in a fair way to be rebuilt they sent their representatives to pray in it, remembering that God had said that his house should be called *a house of prayer for all people*, ^{<281>}Isaiah 56:7. In prayer we must set ourselves as *before the Lord*, must see his eye upon us and have our eye up to him.

(2.) To enquire of God concerning his mind. Note, When we offer up our requests to God it must be with a readiness to receive instructions from him; for, if we turn away our ear from hearing his law, we cannot expect that our prayers should be acceptable to him. We must therefore desire to dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of our life *that we may enquire there* (^{<274>}Psalm 27:4), asking, not only, Lord, what wilt thou do for me? but, Lord *what wilt thou have me to do?*

3. Whom they consulted. They spoke *to the priests that were in the house of the Lord and to the prophets*; the former were an oracle for ordinary cases, the latter for extraordinary; they were blessed with both, and would try if either could acquaint them with the mind of God in this case. Note, God having given diversities of gifts to men, and all to profit with, we should make use of all as there is occasion. They were not so wedded to the priests, their stated ministers, as to distrust the prophets, who appeared, by the gifts given them, well qualified to serve the church; nor yet were they so much enamoured with the prophets as to despise the priests, but they spoke both to the priests and to the prophets, and, in consulting both, gave glory to the God of Israel, and that one Spirit who *works all in all*. God might speak to them either by *urim* or by *prophets* (^{<285>}1 Samuel 28:6), and therefore they would not neglect either. The priests and the prophets were not jealous one of another, nor had any difference among themselves; let not the people then make differences between them, but thank God they had both. The prophets did indeed reprove what was amiss in the priests, but at the same time told the people that the *priest's lips should keep knowledge*, and they must *enquire the law at his mouth*, for *he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts*, ^{<301>}Malachi 2:7. Note, Those that would know God's mind should consult God's ministers, and in doubtful cases ask advice of those whose special business it is to *search the scriptures*.

4. What the case was which they desired satisfaction in (v. 3): *Should I weep in the fifth month, separating myself, as I have done these so many years.* Observe,

(1.) What had been their past practice, not only during the seventy years of the captivity but to this time, which was twenty years after the liberty proclaimed them; they kept up solemn stated fasts for humiliation and prayer, which they religiously observed, according as their opportunities were, in their closets, families, or such assemblies for worship as they had. In the case here, they mention only one, that of the fifth month; but it appears, by ^{<389>}Zechariah 8:19, that they observed four anniversary fasts, one in the fourth month (*June 17*), in remembrance of the breaking up of the wall of Jerusalem (^{<2516>}Jeremiah 52:6), another in the fifth month (*July 4*), in remembrance of the burning of the temple (^{<2517>}Jeremiah 52:12, 13), another in the seventh month (*September 3*), in remembrance of the killing of Gedaliah, which completed their dispersion, and another in the tenth month (*December 10*), in remembrance of the beginning of the siege of Jerusalem, ^{<271>}2 Kings 25:1. Now it was very commendable in them to keep those fasts, thus to humble themselves under those humbling providences, by which God called them to weeping and mourning, thus to accommodate themselves to their troubles, and prepare themselves for deliverance. It would likewise be a means of possessing their children betimes with a due sense of the hand of the Lord gone out against them.

(2.) What was their present doubt — whether they should continue these fasts or no. The case is put as by a single person: *Should I weep?* But it was the case of many, and the satisfaction of one would be a satisfaction to the rest. Or perhaps many had left it off, but the querist will not be determined by the practice of others; if God will have him continue it, he will, whatever others do. His fasting is described by his *weeping, separating himself*. A religious fast must be solemnized, not only by abstinence, here called a separating ourselves from the ordinary lawful comforts of life, but by a godly sorrow for sin, here expressed by weeping. “Should I still keep such *days to afflict the soul* as I have done these so many years?” It is said (v. 5) to be seventy years, computed from the last captivity, as before, ^{<3112>}Zechariah 1:12. The enquiry intimates a readiness to continue it, if God so appoint, though it be a mortification to the flesh.

[1.] Something is to be said for the continuance of these fasts. Fasting and praying are good work at any time, and do good; we have always both

cause enough and need enough to humble ourselves before God. To throw off these fasts would be an evidence of their being too secure, and a cause of their being more so. They were still in distress, and under the tokens of God's displeasure; and it is unwise for the patient to break off his course of physic while he is sensible of such remains of his distemper. But,

[2.] There is something to be said for the letting fall of these fasts. God had changed the method of his providences concerning them, and returned in ways of mercy to them; and ought not they then to change the method of their duties? Now that the bridegroom has returned, why should the *children of the bride-chamber fast*? Every thing is beautiful in its season. And as to the fast of the fifth month (which is that they particularly enquire about), that, being kept in remembrance of the burning of the temple, might seem to be superseded rather than any of the other, because the temple was now in a fair way to be rebuilt. But, having long kept up this fast, they would not leave it off without advice, and without asking and knowing God's mind in the case. Note, A good method of religious services, which we have found beneficial to ourselves and others, ought not to be altered without good reason, and therefore not without mature deliberation.

II. An answer given to this case. It should seem that, though the question looked plausible enough, those who proposed it were not conscientious in it, for they were more concerned about the ceremony than about the substance; they seemed to boast of their fasting, and to upbraid God Almighty with it, that he had not sooner returned in mercy to them; “for we have done it *these so many years*.” As those, ²⁵⁰³Isaiah 58:3, *Wherefore have we fasted, and thou seest not?* And some think that unbelief, and distrust of the promises of God, were at the bottom of their enquiry; for, if they had given them the credit that was due to them, they needed not to doubt but that their fasts ought to be laid aside, now that the occasion of them was over. And therefore the first answer to their enquiry is a very sharp reproof of their hypocrisy, directed, not only to the *people of the land*, but to *the priests*, who had set up these fasts, and perhaps some of them were for keeping them up, to serve some purpose of their own. Let them all take notice that, whereas they thought they had made God very much their debtor by these fasts, they were much mistaken, for they were not acceptable to him, unless they had been observed in a better manner and to better purpose.

1. What they did that was good was not done aright (v. 5): *You fasted and mourned*. They were not chargeable with the omission or neglect of the duty, though it was displeasing to the body (thy fasts were *continually before me*, ^{<50:8>}Psalm 50:8), but they had not managed them aright. Note, Those that come to enquire of their duty must be willing first to be told of their faults. And those that seem zealous for the outside of a duty ought to examine themselves faithfully whether they have the regard they ought to have to the inside of it.

(1.) They had not an eye to God in their fasting: *Did you at all fast unto me, even to me?* He appeals to their own consciences; they will witness against them that they had not been sincere in it, much more will God, who is greater than the heart and knows all things. You know very well that *you did not at all fast to me; in fasting did you fast to me?* There was the carcase and form of the duty, but none of the life, and soul, and power of it. Was it *to me, even to me?* The repetition intimates what a great deal of stress is laid upon this as the main matter, in that and other holy exercises, that they be done to God, even to him, with an eye to his word as our rule, and his glory as our end, in them, seeking to please him and to obtain his favour, and studious by the sincerity of our intention to approve ourselves to him. When this was wanting every fast was but a jest. To fast, and not fast to God, was to mock him and provoke him, and could not be pleasing to him. Those that make fasting a cloak for sin, as Jezebel's fast, or by it make their court to men for their applause, as the Pharisees, or that rest in outward expressions of humiliation while their hearts are unhumbled, as Ahab, do they *fast to God, even to him? Is this the fast that God has chosen?* ^{<58:5>}Isaiah 58:5. If the solemnities of our fasting, though frequent, long, and severe, do not serve to put an edge upon devout affections, to quicken prayer, to increase godly sorrow, and to alter the temper of our minds and the course of our lives for the better, they do not at all answer the intention, and God will not accept them as performed to him, even to him.

(2.) They had the same eye to themselves in their fasting that they had in their eating and drinking (v. 6): “*When you did eat, and when you did drink*, on other days (nay, perhaps on your fast-days, in the observation of which you could, when you saw cause, dispense with yourselves, and take a liberty to eat and drink), *did you not eat for yourselves and drink for yourselves?* Have you not always done as you had a mind yourselves? Why then do you now pretend a desire to know the mind of God? In your

religious feasts and thanksgivings you have had no more an eye to God than in your fasts.” Or, rather, it refers to their common meals; they did no more design the honour of God in their fasting and praying than they did in their eating and drinking; but self was still the centre in which the lines of all their actions, natural, civil, and religious, met. They needed not be in such care about the continuance of their fasts, unless they had kept them better. Note, We miss our end in eating and drinking when we eat to ourselves and drink to ourselves, whereas we should *eat and drink to the glory of God* (~~418~~ 1 Corinthians 10:31), that our bodies may be fit to serve our souls in his service.

2. The principal good thing they should have done was left undone (v. 7): “*Should you not hear the words which the Lord has cried by the former prophets?* Yes, that you should have done on your fast-days; it was not enough to *weep* and *separate yourselves* on your fast-days, in token of your sorrow for the judgments you were under, but you should have *searched the scriptures* of the prophets, that you might have seen what was the ground of God's controversy with your fathers, and might have taken warning by their miseries not to tread in the steps of their iniquities. You ask, Shall we do as we have done, in fasting? No, you must do that which you have not yet done; you must repent of your sins and reform you lives. This is what we now call you to, and it is the same that the former prophets called your fathers to.” To affect them the more with the mischief that sin had done them, that they might be brought to repent of it, he puts them in mind of the former flourishing state of their country: Jerusalem *was then inhabited and in prosperity*, that is now desolate and in distress. The *cities round about*, that are now in ruins, were then inhabited too and *in peace*. The country likewise was very populous: *Men inhabited the south of the plain*, which was not at all fortified, and yet they lived safely, and which was fruitful, and so they lived plentifully. But then God *by the prophets cried* to them, as one in earnest, and importunate with them, to amend their ways and doings, or else their prosperity would soon be at an end. “Now,” says the prophet, “you should have taken notice of that, and have inferred that what was required of them for the preventing of the judgments, and which they did not, is required of you for the removal of the judgments; and, if you do it not, all your fasting and weeping signify nothing.” Note, The words of the later prophets agree with those of the former; and, whether people are in prosperity or adversity, they must be

called upon to leave their sins and do their duty; this must still be the burden of every song.

~~<300>~~ ZECHARIAH 7:8-14

WILFUL DISOBEDIENCE OF ISRAEL

What was said v. 7, that they *should have heard the words of the former prophets*, is here enlarged upon, for warning to these hypocritical enquirers, who continued their sins when they asked with great preciseness whether they should continue their fasts. This prophet had before put them in mind of their fathers' disobedience to the calls of the prophets, and what was the consequence of it (~~<300>~~Zechariah 1:4-6), and now here again; for others' harms should be our warnings. God's judgments upon Israel of old for their sins were written for admonition to us Christians (~~<400>~~1 Corinthians 10:11), and the same use we should make of similar providences in our own day.

I. This prophet here repeats the heads of the sermons which the former prophets preached to their fathers (v. 9, 10), because the very same things were required of them now. “Thus does the *Lord of hosts speak* to you now, and thus he did speak to your fathers, saying, *Execute true judgment.*” The duties here required of them, which would have been the lengthening of the tranquillity of their fathers and must be the restoring of their tranquillity, are not keeping fasts and offering sacrifices, but *doing justly* and *loving mercy*, duties which they were bound to by the light and law of nature, though there had been no prophets sent to insist upon them, duties which had a direct tendency to the public welfare and peace, and which they themselves would be the gainers by, and not God.

1. Magistrates must administer justice impartially, according to the maxims of the law and the merits of the cause, without respect of persons: “*Judge judgment of truth*, and execute it when you have judged it.”

2. Neighbours must have a tender concern for one another, and must not only do one another no wrong, but must be ready to do one another all the good offices that lie in their power. They must *show mercy and compassion every man to his brother*, as the case called for it. The infirmities of others, as well as their calamities, are to be looked upon with

compassion. *Hanc veniam petimusque damusque vicissim* — *This kindness we ask and exercise.*

3. They must not bear hard upon those whom they have advantage against, and who, they know, are not able to help themselves. They must not, either in commerce or in course of law, oppress *the widow, the fatherless, the stranger, and the poor*, v. 10. The weakest must not be thrust to the wall because they are weakest. No thanks to men not to deny right to those who are in a capacity to demand it and recover it; but we must, not only for wrath, but also for conscience' sake, give those their own who have not power to force it from us. Or it intimates that that which is but exactness with others is exaction upon the widows and the fatherless; nay, that not relieving and helping them as we ought is, in effect, oppressing them.

4. They must not only not do wrong to any, but they must not so much as desire it nor think of it: "*Let none of you imagine evil against his brother in your heart.* Do not project it; do not wish it; nay do not so much as please yourself with the fancy of it." The law of God lays a restraint upon the heart, and forbids the entertaining, forbids the admitting, of a malicious, spiteful, ill-natured thought. ^{<GRB>}Deuteronomy 15:9, *Beware that there be not a thought in thy Belial heart against thy brother.*

II. He describes the wilfulness and disobedience of their fathers, who persisted in all manner of wickedness and injustice, notwithstanding these exhortations and admonitions frequently given them in God's name; various expressions to this purport are here heaped up (v. 11, 12), setting forth the stubbornness of that carnal mind which is *enmity against God, and is not in subjection to the law of God, neither indeed can be.* They were obstinate and refractory, and persisted in their transgressions of the law purely from a spirit of contradiction to the law.

1. They would not, if they could help it, come within hearing of the prophets, but kept at a distance; or, if they could not avoid hearing what they said, yet they resolved they would not heed it: *They refused to hearken*, and looked another way as if they had not been spoken to.

2. If they did hear what was said to them, and, as it seemed, inclined at first to comply with it, yet they flew off when it came to the setting to, and, like a bullock unaccustomed to the yoke, *they pulled away the shoulder*, and would not submit to the *easy yoke and the light burden* of God's commandments. *They gave a withdrawing shoulder* (so the word

is); they seemed to lay their shoulder to the work, but they presently withdrew it again, as those ^{<2840>}Jeremiah 34:10, 11. They were like a deceitful bow, as that son that said, *I go, sir, but went not.*

3. They filled their own minds with prejudices against the word of God, and had some objection or other ready wherewith to fortify themselves against every sermon they heard. *They stopped their ears, that they should not hear*, as the deaf adder (^{<2841>}Psalm 58:4), and none are so deaf as those that will not hear, that *make their own ear heavy*, as the word is.

4. They resolved that nothing which was said to them, for the enforcing of these injunctions, should make any impression upon them: *They made their hearts as an adamant-stone*, as a *diamond*, the hardest of stones to be wrought upon, or as a *flint*, which the mason cannot hew into shape as he can other stone out of the quarry. Nothing is so hard, so unmalleable, so inflexible, as the heart of a presumptuous sinner; and those whose hearts are hard may thank themselves; they are of their own hardening, and it is just with God to give them over to a reprobate sense, to the hardness and impenitence of their own hearts. These stubborn sinners hardened their hearts on purpose *lest they should hear* what God said to them by the written word, *by the law of Moses*, and by the *words of the prophets* that preached to them; they had *Moses and the prophets*, but resolved they would hear neither, nor would they have been persuaded though one had been sent to them from the dead. The *words of the prophet* were not regarded by them, though they were words which the Lord of hosts sent and directed to them, though he sent them immediately *by his Spirit* in the prophets; so that in despising them they affronted God himself and *resisted the Holy Ghost*. Note, The reason why men are not good is because they will not be so; they will not consider, will not comply; and therefore, *if thou scornest, thou alone shalt bear it.*

III. He shows the fatal consequences of it to their fathers: *Therefore came great wrath from the Lord of hosts*. God was highly displeased with them, and justly; he required nothing of them but what was reasonable in itself and beneficial to them; and yet they refused, and in a most insolent manner too. What master could bear to be so abused by his own servant? Such an implacable enmity to the gospel as this was to the law and the prophets was that which brought *wrath to the uttermost* upon the last generation of the Jewish church, ^{<2846>}1 Thessalonians 2:16. Great sins against *the Lord of hosts*, whose authority is incontestable, bring *great*

wrath from the Lord of hosts, whose power is irresistible. And the effect was,

1. As they had turned a deaf ear to God's word, so God turned a deaf ear to their prayers, v. 13. *As he cried* to them in their prosperity to leave their sins, *and they would not hear*, but persisted in their iniquities, so *they cried to him* in the day of their trouble to remove his judgments, and he would not hear, but lengthened out their calamities. Those that set God at defiance, in the height of their pride, when pangs came upon them cried unto him. *Lord, in trouble have they visited thee.* But God has said it, and will abide by it, *He that turns away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer shall be an abomination*, ^{<189>}Proverbs 28:9; 1:24, etc. Iniquity, regarded in the heart, will certainly spoil the success of prayer, ^{<168>}Psalms 66:18.

2. As they flew off from their duty and allegiance to God, and were of desultory and unsettled spirits, so God dissipated them and threw them about as chaff before a whirlwind: *He scattered them among all the nations whom they knew not*, and whom therefore they could not expect to receive any kindness from, v. 14.

3. As they violated all the laws of their land, so God took away all the glories of it: *Their land was desolate after them, and no man passed through or returned.* All that country that was the kingdom of the two tribes, after the dispersion of the remaining Jews, upon the slaughter of Gedaliah, was left utterly uninhabited; there was not man, woman, or child, in it, till the Jews returned at the end of seventy years' captivity; nay, it should seem, the very roads that lay through the country were deserted (none passed or repassed), which, as it had an intimation of mercy in it (though they were cast out of it, yet it was kept empty for their return), so for the present it made the judgment appear much the more dismal; for what a horrid wilderness must a land be that had been so many years uninhabited! And they might thank themselves; it was they that by their own wickedness laid *the pleasant land desolate*. It was not so much the Chaldeans that did it. No; they did it themselves. The desolations of a land are owing to the wickedness of its inhabitants, ^{<1474>}Psalms 107:34. This came of their wilful disobedience to the law of God. And the present generation saw how desolate sin had made that pleasant land, and yet would not take warning.