

Shalom AZ Ministries

In Pursuit of Israel's Redemption



"The Question Behind the Fast"

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Devotion and Discussion Questions

Key Texts (TLV): Zech. 7:1-14; 1:1-6; Jer. 24:5-7; Is. 58:1-14; Heb. 4:12-13; Mk. 10:17-22

The Question Beneath the Question

Sometimes we come to God wanting a simple answer: "Do I need to keep doing this or not?" "How long do I have to keep going through this?" "Is this season almost over?" We want a yes or a no, a clear instruction, maybe even permission to move on. That is essentially what happens in Zechariah 7. Two years have passed since the visions of the first six chapters. It is the fourth day of Kislev in the fourth year of King Darius—December 7, 518 BCE—and a delegation comes to Jerusalem with what seems like a straightforward religious question. *"Should I mourn and consecrate myself in the fifth month as I have done for so many years?"* (Zech. 7:3). For approximately seventy years, the Jewish people had observed a fast in the fifth month, mourning the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. But now the Temple was being rebuilt. So the question was understandable: Do we still need to do this?

Whether this delegation traveled twelve miles from Bethel or made a four-month journey from Babylon, they clearly cared enough about the answer to go looking for it. As far as they could see, they were trying to be faithful. But ADONAI does something He so often does: instead of simply answering their question, He asks a deeper one. They were asking, "Do we still have to fast?" God was asking, "Why were you fasting in the first place?" They wanted clarification about an observance; God wanted to talk about their hearts. And that is where this passage gets uncomfortably close to us. *Because sometimes the most important question is not **whether** we are doing the right things.* The deeper question is: **Why** are we doing them, and what are they actually producing in us?

1. ASK WHY YOU DO WHAT YOU DO

ADONAI says, *"When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and in the seventh months for the past seventy years, did you really fast for Me?"* (Zech. 7:5). The Hebrew places tremendous emphasis on that final thought: **for Me—Me Myself?** They were asking about the fifth-month fast, a fast God had never actually commanded. But then He brings up the seventh-month fast as well, the one associated with *Yom Kippur* that He had commanded. In other words, this is bigger than whether a particular religious practice was required. God is asking about motive. "When you did what I commanded and when you did the extra things you added, was any of it really about Me?" They had endured seventy years of exile and discipline, but had the experience actually produced a heart that knew Him?

That is a difficult question because our motives can be incredibly sneaky. We can work harder when the boss is watching, practice harder when the coach is looking, or serve someone more enthusiastically when we know it will be noticed. And we can do the same thing spiritually. Prayer, fasting, worship, giving, serving, studying Scripture—even good things can slowly become about being noticed, feeling spiritual, earning some kind of "extra credit," or trying to get God to give us the outcome we want. Jeremiah said the goal of exile was that God would *"give them a heart to know Me—for I am ADONAI... For they will return to Me with their whole heart"* (Jer. 24:7). God did not send them into exile merely so they would learn how to fast. He

wanted their hearts. So when pressure comes into our lives, perhaps the question is not simply, “When will this be over?” but, “Lord, what is this revealing in me? What are You trying to produce in me?”

2. REFLECT HIS CHARACTER, NOT JUST RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

ADONAI then tells them exactly what He had been after all along: *“Administer true judgment and practice mercy and compassion each to his brother. Do not oppress the widow or the orphan, the outsider or the poor. Furthermore, do not let any of you devise evil against one another in your heart.”* (Zech. 7:9–10). They came asking about fasting, and God essentially says, “How are you doing with justice? How are you doing with *chesed*—covenant love and faithfulness? How about compassion? How are you treating the widow, the orphan, the outsider and the afflicted?” These things reflect His character. Justice, truth, covenant faithfulness and compassion are not secondary concerns; they flow from who He is. God is saying, “I want you to be like Me to one another.”

This is the same message ADONAI had spoken through Isaiah long before the exile. In Isaiah 58, the people complained that they had fasted and God had not seemed to notice. But God showed them that while they were fasting, they were still exploiting others, fighting, pointing fingers and pursuing their own desires. Then He told them the kind of fast He had chosen: *“to release the bonds of wickedness, to untie the cords of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free... to share your bread with the hungry and to bring the homeless poor into your house”* (Is. 58:6–7). God is not impressed by the theater of religion when His character is absent from our lives. We have been chosen by Him to walk in His chosen ways—to bring His justice, compassion, truth and *chesed* into the places where He has planted us. The question is not merely, “Am I doing religious things?” It is, “Am I becoming more like my Father?”

3. KEEP YOUR HEART SOFT ENOUGH TO HEAR

Then comes the warning. God reminds this generation what happened to their fathers: *“They refused to pay attention. They stubbornly turned their backs and stopped their ears from hearing. Indeed, they made their hearts as hard as flint, preventing them from hearing the Torah or the words that ADONAI-Tzva’ot sent by His Ruach through the former prophets.”* (Zech. 7:11–12). The picture is powerful. They gave God the cold shoulder. They made their ears heavy so they could not *shema*—hear in a way that leads to obedience. Eventually their hearts became hard as flint. It was not that God had failed to speak. He had spoken repeatedly through His Ruach and through the prophets. The tragedy was that His people had gradually become unwilling to hear.

That is why Zechariah 7 reaches all the way back to the message that opened the book two years earlier: *“Return to Me... and I will return to you”* (Zech. 1:3). The danger is rarely that we wake up one morning and suddenly decide to rebel against God. More often, it is a slow fade. Our way begins creeping back in. Our desires become more important. We learn how to manipulate even spiritual things so that we can still get what we want. Little by little, our ears become heavy and our hearts become less responsive. But the Word of God still cuts through our self-deception, reaching beneath appearances, exposing the intentions of the heart (Heb.4:12–13). Like the rich young ruler, we may believe we have checked every box until Yeshua touches the one thing we cannot imagine surrendering. The question becomes: **When God puts His finger on that place, will we hear Him?**

CONCLUSION: WHAT IS THE PAIN PRODUCING?

The delegation came wanting to know whether the fast could finally be over. But ADONAI's response was essentially, "Before we talk about whether the fast is over, have you learned what it was supposed to teach you?" That is such an important question for every difficult season of our lives. We naturally want the pressure to stop. We want the exile to end. We want things to get back to normal. But perhaps the better prayer is, "Lord, before this season ends, **do in me everything You intended to do through it.**" What is the pressure squeezing out of us? What is the pain revealing? Are we becoming more compassionate, more truthful, more just, more tenderhearted and more surrendered to Him? Or are we simply waiting for the discomfort to end so that we can return to exactly who we were before?

There are moments when we need to stop asking God merely to change our circumstances and invite Him to search our hearts. Today, bring Him the religious activity, the good work, the service, the fasting, the giving, the ministry—and ask Him, "Is this really for You?" Then bring Him the pain, disappointment, discipline and pressure and ask, "What are You trying to produce in me?" Finally, give Him permission to put His finger on whatever you have resisted surrendering. Do not give Him the cold shoulder. Do not allow your ears to become heavy or your heart hard as flint. Today, choose again to say, "ADONAI, I want my whole heart to belong to You. Produce in me what You desire. Form in me what You want to form. Make me like You."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why did the people originally begin observing the fifth-month fast, and why were they now questioning whether they should continue it?
2. What do you think ADONAI meant when He asked, "*Did you really fast for Me?*" (Zech. 7:5)? What does this reveal about the difference between religious activity and genuine devotion?
3. Zech. 7:9–10 connects knowing God with justice, mercy, compassion and care for the vulnerable. Why are these qualities such important expressions of God's character?
4. **Personal Reflection:** Is there something good or spiritual that you regularly do—serving, giving, worshiping, praying, studying, fasting—where God may be inviting you to examine your motives and ask, "Why am I really doing this?"
5. **Personal Reflection:** Think about a difficult or uncomfortable season in your life. Instead of only asking, "When will this be over?" what might change if you began asking, "Lord, what are You revealing, forming or producing in me through this?"

CLOSING PRAYER

ADONAI, search our hearts and show us what we cannot see in ourselves. Cut through our excuses, our religious habits and even our good intentions, and reveal why we do what we do. We do not simply want to go through the motions; we want to know You and return to You with our whole hearts. Where our ears have become heavy, help us hear again. Where our hearts have become hard, soften them by Your Ruach.

Form Your character in us. Teach us to walk in justice, truth, chesed and compassion. Make us sensitive to the widow, the orphan, the outsider, the poor and the hurting around us. And in every season of pressure, discipline or pain, keep us from simply asking when it will end. Instead, give us the courage to pray, "ADONAI, produce in me what You want to produce. Form in me what You want to form. Make me more like You."

B'Shem Yeshua, In the name of Yeshua, amen.