

December 2

Scriptures: Read Zechariah 7 & 8

Key Verse: "...I will save you, and you shall be a blessing. Do not fear, let your hands be strong." (Zechariah 8:13b)

Overview

The messages from the Lord recorded in chapters seven and eight came almost two years after the eight visions (1:1, 7). By this time (ninth month; 518 B.C.), the work on the Temple was well underway. A few months earlier, the people had held the annual fast in commemoration of the destruction of the Temple, which took place in the fifth month of 586 B.C. (cf. Jer. 52:12-13). Now, however, a delegation from the town of Bethel (some of the exiles who returned with Zerubbabel resettled in Bethel; Ezra 2:28; Neh. 7:32) had come to enquire of the Lord from the priests and the prophets (Zechariah and Haggai). They questioned whether this fast should be continued, since the Lord had restored the remnant, as He had promised, and the Temple was almost completely rebuilt.

The Lord used Zechariah to communicate His message not only to them but to the whole congregation of Israel. God's initial response came in the form of a question, which would lead them to do some self-searching. The Lord knew their selfish motivations and that the various fasts were merely a meaningless external formality that grew out of their self-pity; but the fasts were supposed to be an expression of their sorrow for the sin and rebellion against God that had led to these calamities in the first place. Along with the fast in the fifth month, there was also one fast in the seventh month, commemorating the murder of Gedaliah (Jer. 41:1-3; 2 Kgs 25:22-25), one in the fourth month, remembering when the Babylonians broke through the wall and entered Jerusalem (2 Kgs 25:3-4), and one in the tenth month, in memory of when the siege was initially laid on Jerusalem (8:19; 2 Kgs 25:1).

God was concerned with seeing obedience to Him and righteousness of the heart, not self-imposed fasts. The only fast the law required was on the Day of Atonement. Why should they trouble themselves with things that the Lord had not commanded, when they (their fathers) had been so negligent and disobedient in the things that He had commanded through the "former prophets" (pre-Exilic; 7:7)? The Lord's message through Zechariah was essentially the same, for God's standards of justice and righteousness do not change. He demanded His people to execute justice and show mercy and compassion, especially to the needy; this was the essence of not only religion and faith, but also the essence of true fasting (cf. Isa. 58:6-7).

The message of the Lord in chapter eight continues the line of thought from chapter seven. Although the land had been made desolate by the sinful inhabitants who had incurred the Lord's wrath, the Lord had not abandoned His land, just as He did not abandon His people during their time of punishment in exile. God had a burning zeal for Zion and a resolve to return and dwell there (8:2). He had promised the people, when they had begun to rebuild the Temple, that His presence would be with them (Hag. 2:4-5), but here He is going beyond that. Zechariah foretells of a time when God's presence will so transform Jerusalem that it will be called "the City of Truth" and "The Holy Mountain", for in that glorious day, the throne of the Messiah Jesus will

be upon that Mount (8:3). After the Lord gathers His faithful people from their dispersion throughout the world (8:7-8), He will establish a Holy Land marked by perfect peace and security. The aged and young will be outside without fear, enjoying one another's company in the streets (8:4-5; cf. Isa. 65:17-25)). To those who heard Zechariah's message, these predictions seemed impossible and almost too wonderful to believe, but nothing is impossible with God.

The people understood that these blessings of God were dependent upon their obedience to Him. Therefore, this bright picture for the future both encouraged and motivated them to please the Lord and build the Temple, just as it should encourage believers today to please God and live in obedience to Him. The Lord Himself gave the word of encouragement: "Let your hands be strong" (8:9,13), for God desires to bless His people and not bring judgment upon them in His wrath.

Zechariah reminded his audience that before they began to rebuild the Temple they had been suffering with external and internal strife, as well as economic problems. But now that they were obedient to God and had been working on the Temple for about two years, they could see the Lord's temporal blessings upon them. These blessings were conditional upon their faithfulness to Him, which included speaking the truth, loving one's neighbour, and judging with "truth, justice, and peace" (8:16). If they continued doing these things, then, in answer to the question on fasting (8:19; 7:3), God said He would abolish all their fast days and turn them into joyous feast days. Today, however, these fast days are still observed by orthodox Jews. It is only the Lord Jesus Christ, who came in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, who can do a work in people's hearts that turns their days of mourning into gladness. It is also because of Jesus that many people from every nation and tongue can, along with the remnant of faithful and believing Jews, enter into the New Covenant relationship with God and therefore be cleansed and able to stand before Him to pray in spirit and in truth (8:20-23).

Prayer

Father, You turn our mourning into gladness, because of the New Covenant that You have established through the blood of Jesus Christ. We repent from sin and evil and thank You for that cleansing blood which puts us in right standing with You.