**Sadness to Celebration**

Text: Zechariah 7-8

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Scriptures: **Zechariah 7 and 8**

**Series: Zechariah**. Sermon 11 of 19.

**Theme:** Following a question about memorial fasting, the Lord warns his people not to repeat the mistakes of the past. He promises to return and bless his people, exhorting them to be faithful in justice, to persevere and to expect a great ingathering of peoples from the nations into the covenant community.

**FCF:** Our natural desire for outward religion, not a heartfelt love for the Lord which then flows into all of our lives

**Proposition:** Do not mourn past losses, but rejoice in present and future gains in Christ

**Introduction**

Depression is quite common in middle-aged and older men. Women ages 40 to 59 have the highest rate of depression (12.3 %) of any group based on age and gender in the U.S. There are many factors which lead to profound sadness, but the causes often include: Looking back at the past with regrets. Sadness over past events, hurts, injustices, losses, hopes not realized, expectations not met, mistakes made. Psalm 137 expresses the grief of the captivity of God’s people as they looked back in sadness: “*By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion*”.

The loss of God’s blessings brings sadness to His people.

1. **Why are you so sad?**

The opening words of chapter 7 are an accurate timestamp “the fourth year of King Darius on the fourth day of the night month” – Dec 7, 518BC. It was just over two years after the night visions which Zechariah received were recorded as chapters 1-6. It was about two years before the temple rebuild was completed. Construction was about half way through.

A group of people, a delegation, arrive from Bethel, about 20kms to the north of Jerusalem. The people there had been regularly fasting for the seventy years since the destruction of the temple and the city as an ongoing sign of their sorrow. Although the Law of Moses only required a single fast, once a year on the Day of Atonement, mourning over the great loss of the city of God was a huge feature on their calendars.

In the 4th month they fasted to remember when the wall of Jerusalem was breached by the Babylonians (Jer 39:2). Then in the 5th month they recalled the burning of the city and the destruction of the temple by Nebuchadnezzar, followed in the 7th month by another fast as a reminder of the murder of Gedaliah, governor of Judah (2 Ki 25:25; Jer 41:1-2). To top it all off in the 10th month they fasted again, marking the beginning of the siege of the city (2 Ki 25:1-2; Jer 39:1). So this was a very sad bunch of people!

In Australian aboriginal culture, the tribal family groups mourn together of the death of a family member for at least a week and sometimes up to 3 months. They call this “sorry business”. Back in Zechariah’s day, the people who had remained in the land had been engaged in “sorry business” for seventy years! Now they wanted to know whether they could stop fasting now that the temple and city were being rebuilt.

Instead of giving a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer through his prophet Zechariah, the Lord asks them a probing question: **v5** ‘*When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months for the past seventy years, was it really for me that you fasted?*’. The question is what (or who) was your motivation for fasting? **Why** were you sorry?

There were really only two possibilities - which are expressed this way in **2 Cor 7:10** “*Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death*”.

When someone is caught having committed a crime, they are always sorry. The question is whether they are sad because they did wrong or whether they are sad because they have been found out. It can look very much the same on the outside: regret, shame, melancholy and tears; but the inner heart motivation is completely different.

Was the reason for their fasting godly sorrow over their rebellion against their God who loved them or was it worldly sorrow over their loss of city and temple? This inner heart motivation question had been proclaimed through the Lord’s prophet’s repeatedly (e.g. Isaiah 58:3-9; Amos 5:21-24). Remember when Samuel challenged King Saul’s reasons for not obeying the Lord’s instructions but doing his own thing whilst appearing to be very religious. Samuel asked “*Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams*”.

What does obedience look like? Willing response to God’s covenant commands, you can see some there in verses 9-10: “*Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor. In your hearts do not think evil of each other*”. These were not new rules for living, but ones which God’s prophets had repeatedly reminded His people about. He does not want our ceremonial religion which is all show; merely a superstitious formalism. God desires to see a human heart which loves Him and loves others more than self.

How can you tell if you are truly sorry for disobeying the perfect loving law of God and that you love Him? As Jesus said, "*If you love me, you will obey what I command*” (John 14:15).

Back then, the people had made the mistake of not listening to their God. Before they were carried off into exile, as God’s judgement against them, this is how they responded to the Lord’s Word: (v11-12) *“They refused to pay attention; stubbornly they turned their backs and stopped up their ears. They made their hearts as hard as flint and would not listen to the law or to the words that the LORD Almighty had sent by his Spirit through the earlier prophets”*

So the Lord was rightfully angry with them because, in their pride, they had blocked their audio channels. It was like them putting their fingers into their ears and saying, “not listening”. They had hardened their hearts so that they were impervious to God’s Word. They had seared their consciences so that they would not receive the lovingkindness of the Lord’s truth.

So the Lord reminds the people after the exile of what had happened. He had made the land which had once been a delightful place, flowing with milk and honey, full of fruit and vineyards into a wasteland. The city lay in piles of rubble, very much like the CBD of Christchurch a few years ago after the earthquake there. The temple was a ruin, very much like the Cornwall Street church building which stood empty and unusable after the February 2011 earthquake.

The Bible gives us the historical reason why Israel was taken away from the promised lands as a captive people: this was God’s judgement. As he says in v14 “*I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations, where they were strangers*”. However, we must not say that the February 2011 earthquake was God’s specific judgement over sins; either of the city of Christchurch, or of the church congregation(s) there. However, it is good to ask, in light of this passage of Scripture, whether we are as sorry about our past sins as a congregation

Has our own congregational life been marked at times by ritual worship, involvement in church activities because these were thought to be our ‘duty’ and thereby gain favour from God? Has false religion, works without any underlying heart change, been practiced in the past? Have we held fast to the doctrinal truths of salvation by grace alone, whilst actually trying to build our own stairway to heaven by our works? Have we been **more sorry** about the loss of friends from this congregation, the shortage of men to serve as elders than we have about our own lack of obedience to the Lord we profess to love?

What about you personally? When you look back on your past, are you more sorry about the consequences (relational, financial, physical) of the mistakes you have made or about sins which have underpinned some of those mistakes and have thereby resulted in much spiritual harm to your soul?

The message of Zechariah chapter 7 is don’t practice religious rituals! Look at your history and see what the result was. Do not repeat the mistakes of the past, but admit them, learn from them and don’t repeat them!

Sing: 455 We have not known thee as we ought

Read Zechariah chapter 8

Perhaps you’ve had the experience when someone hears that you go to church that they say “Oh, so you’re religious person”. For many this means being involved in specified holy rituals which will help you find your way to God – repeating set prayers, kneeling down at certain times of the day, burning candles, going on a pilgrimage, remembering certain feasts, chanting special songs.

If religion is understood to be trying to find your way to God by these means, then Christianity is not a religion! Christianity is about God opening up a way to reach man; summarized in four words – ‘God sent his son’. Christianity is about Christ, God’s Son and what he has done!

You and I cannot construct a stairway to heaven, but God can, and he has from the top down! And that is why you should be so happy today.

1. **Why you should be so happy**

Back in Genesis 12, almost 4,000 years ago, God had committed himself to a people, to the descendants of Abraham. Then he had rescued them from bondage as slaves in Egypt expressing his love for them this way “*I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians*” (Ex 6:7). God committed Himself to love as a faithful husband (Hosea 2:19).

Say you are a married man. You stumble one day on a website left open on your wife’s laptop, it’s a ‘cheating site’ – perhaps called ‘Ashley Madison’. As you investigate further, it’s clear that the wife you love has been with another man. She has committed adultery. She has been unfaithful. How would you feel if you deeply, deeply loved this woman to whom you were betrothed? Angry, jealous? No. very angry, very jealous. She has shown by her actions that she does not deserve your love. You have every right to divorce her. She has shown herself to be unworthy to be your wife.

Look at how God feels about the faithlessness and empty religion of his people: "*I am very jealous for Zion; I am burning with jealousy for her*." (Zech 8:2) God’s intense jealousy for his people, reflects his intense love.

Imagine if God had said: because of her unfaithfulness I am going to have nothing more to do with her. She can live with the consequences of her mistakes, the city can remain broken, the land a wasteland and the people can keep being depressed about how much they have lost because of their own wickedness! I think that this is what you could reasonably expect God to say. But he does not! He promises to return and to bless! "*I will return to Zion and dwell in Jerusalem. Then Jerusalem will be called the City of Truth, and the mountain of the LORD Almighty will be called the Holy Mountain*." (Zech 8:4)

This is why you should be so happy today. Whatever mistakes you have made, however false your worship may have been at times past, however much you have put your hope in making sufficient personal sacrifices so that you can please God enough to let you into his heaven; whether or not you have drifted away from the Lord and become entranced by the seduction of the world, God’s promises to love a people remain. The real question for you today is whether you will be a part of that people.

Imagine for a moment this congregation greatly enlarged. The church building becomes too small to hold the growing numbers who come to worship! Consider that every time we have an election for elder or deacon we don’t put up two names for the congregation to vote from amongst, but we have 3 or 4 because there are so many men willing, able and qualified to serve. Think of a time when everyone will have many close friendships within the church. A day when many who have grown up in this church but are not walking with the Lord at the moment return. Imagine a whole range of accents as people from different nations worship with us! Our calendars full of professions of faith, adult baptisms of those who have come into the church, weddings, and regular congregational meals where there’s plenty of food, but we keep running out of plates because there are so many people of all ages. Great growth problems to have!

Seem a bit far-fetched to you at this time?

Well God’s promise to bring peace and prosperity to a multi-generational covenant community in Jerusalem (v4) clearly seemed a bit like a pipe dream to the people back then, because God says in verse 6: "*It may seem marvellous to the remnant of this people at that time, but will it seem marvellous to me?*". The implied answer is ‘no’ – because I have determined that it will be so!

God is saying these promises may seem marvellous, wonderful, miraculous, even too difficult to you. But they do not to me. I am the God of the marvellous, the wonderful, the miraculous, the difficult, the ‘impossible’.

The word ‘remnant’ here implies both the judgement of God (only a few are left), but also his mercy (yet some still remain). The great mercy of God is wonderfully expressed in the core covenant promise there in verses 7&8: "*I will save my people from the countries of the east and the west. I will bring them back to live in Jerusalem; they will be my people, and I will be faithful and righteous to them as their God*." God is going to save his people. He will return to his people and dwell with them. He will gather them from across the globe to be a multi-generational covenant community of old and young. They will enjoy material blessing: their crops will grow well (v12) and they will be a blessing to the people around them (v13). The Lord is going to do good to his people again! (v15).

They will have every reason to be happy. Instead of “sorry business” there will be “glad business”! The regular fasts of mourning on their calendars will become days of joyful festivities. It’s going to be party time and the joyful gatherings of God’s people is going to act like a magnet to the surrounding communities! They will want to join in this great gladness too!

You can see this beautifully expressed in v20-23: *"Many peoples and the inhabitants of many cities will yet come, and the inhabitants of one city will go to another and say, 'Let us go at once to entreat the LORD and seek the LORD Almighty. I myself am going.' And many peoples and powerful nations will come to Jerusalem to seek the LORD Almighty and to entreat him." This is what the LORD Almighty says: "In those days ten men from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, 'Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you.'"*

The trickle of visitors into church is going to turn into a flood! Imagine if each one of our church members here this morning had come to worship with 10 others hanging onto their jackets! We might run out of coffee after the service, but wouldn’t it be wonderful!

So perhaps you are thinking. Well did this whole raft of promises actually come true in history? Well, yes and no.

The temple was completed, the people did resume worship there. It seems that some lessons were learned from the mistakes of the past (e.g. less idol worship), the land did become more productive, but the flood of nations didn’t come in. The problem was that the people continued to make mistakes.

The Lord clearly told them what obedience from a heart of love for him looks like: v16&17 *“These are the things you are to do: Speak the truth to each other and render true and sound judgment in your courts; do not plot evil against your neighbour, and do not love to swear falsely. I hate all this," declares the LORD.* Yet they continued to sin, to make mistakes, so they did not see the fullness of these great promises.

What was needed was a person who didn’t make mistakes – someone perfect. Someone who could save a people for God. That person is Jesus Christ. He lived mistake-free life and died a truly innocent man so that you and I would not reap the eternal consequences of the mistakes we have made by disobeying God.

After Jesus died, he was raised from the grave by the power of God. He has now ascended to be with God the Father and He has sent his Spirit to dwell amongst His people. A large people gathered into local churches like this one. A growing people, a blessed people, a happy people, a people who celebrate their Lord’s unfailing love on the first day of every week. A people who are encouraged to see the marvellous things the Lord is doing in their midst! A people who thank him for multiple generations in the church. A people who are grateful for peace in the congregation, and who look out for visitors who can ‘hook onto them’ as they come to worship!

Christ’s work of building the temple of His body: the church, is not yet complete. Church members, deacons, elders, pastors still make mistakes. We all still sin. The church is yet spotty and blemished. We don’t always see local church congregations full of older men and women, worshipping in peace with young boys and girls. We don’t always experience productivity in our businesses and our work. Sadly, the truth in love is not always spoken. Visitors from outside the church do not always flood into our worship services, Bible studies and fellowship groups. We do not always feel happy. Sometimes we are sad, depressed and mournful. The road ahead looks steep and difficult. We feel weak and weary. There seem to be too many critical tasks for too few hands.

Those who returned from exile to rebuild the temple 2,500 years ago felt similar discouragement at times. So, the encouragements in our text to them are also God’s blessed exhortation to us: “*Let your hands be strong so that the temple may be built*” –v9 and again “*Do not be afraid, but let your hands be strong*” – v15 (cf. 1 Cor 15:58)

God’s word to us today as we love Christ and seek to obey Him is to keep trusting, to keep serving, to keep going! For our Lord has promised to bless his people. We have every reason to be happy both now and in the future!

AMEN