



**Looking Inwards** (15 mins)  
*Caring For Each Other*

*Reflecting on your life at the moment, is there anything you would like to share with other members of your home group which you feel is appropriate (this is an opportunity to share, not something you have to do, however, 'It's the sharing that enables the caring!') for:*

- Thanksgiving?
- Prayer?
- Encouragement?
- Support in any way?



**Looking Outwards** (15 mins)  
*Concern For Others*

*Is there anything concerning someone in your: family; circle of friends; neighbours or church, which you would like to share (please be sure not pass on anything that is confidential or which you think the person concerned would not wish to be shared) for:*

- Thanksgiving?
- Prayer?
- Encouragement?
- Support in any way?

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*God's Big Plan For A Struggling People 4/6*  
**HG131: True Religion**

Zechariah 7 and 8

Home Group Study Notes

23 October 2016 - Pauline Woolnough



**PLEASE COMPLETE AS MUCH AS YOU CAN ON THIS WORKSHEET IN PREPARATION BEFORE THE MEETING!**

*Don't forget to take your Bible to Home Group with you, along with any previous notes and other resources which might be helpful.*



**Welcome** (10 mins)  
*Ice Breaker*

What do you usually give up for Lent?



**Looking Upwards** (10 mins)  
*Worship*

In your time of worship, you may want to sing Songs of Praise; listen to a Worship CD, as well as using Meditations; Bible Readings; Prayers ...



God's Big Plan For A Struggling People 4/6  
HG131: True Religion

Zechariah 7 and 8

Home Group Sermon Notes

23 October 2016 - Pauline Woolnough

**Introduction**

Always, while we enjoy good times there are people nearby going through tough times and while a baby is born bringing new life, joy and hope for the future in one family, another family is saying goodbye to a loved one and facing life ahead without them. That is the reality of life and we will all experience each situation at one time or another. Through Zechariah 7 and 8 we will discover again that God can change our sadness into joy, our fasting into feasting and as the Psalmist says, he can turn our "mourning into dancing." Psalm 30:11-12.

**From Fasting to Feasting**

It is now 2 years since Zechariah had given his visions encouraging the people to rebuild the temple and in that time they'd been busy and it was now half finished. The temple was rising before their eyes, the nation's situation looked promising and things were on the "up," the future looked good and the question came to mind about whether they should continue to observe the days of national sorrow and fasting in memory of the temple's destruction while they were captive in Babylon. There was only one fast that God commanded his people to observe and that was the fast on the Day of Atonement. (Lev 23:16-32), yet following the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple the people had started the tradition of fasting at 4 other times of the year. It was approaching the fifth month when they had chosen to commemorate the destruction of the temple and so a delegation of men came to Jerusalem and they asked a question, found in v3 "*..by asking the priests of the house of the Lord Almighty, and the prophets saying, "should I mourn and fast in the fifth month, as I have done for so many years?"*"

The answer to that question doesn't actually come until Chapter 8:19 when we see that a day is coming when the fasts "*will become joyful and glad occasions and happy festivals for Judah.*" However, on asking this question the delegation find they have some questions to answer themselves first and the Lord asks a very tough one that speaks to every believer of every century and culture, one that we could apply to all kinds of situations and traditions. He asks this, v5-6 "*Ask all the people of the land and the priests, 'When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months for the past seventy years, was it really for me that you fasted? And when you were eating and drinking, were you not just feasting for yourselves?' That is some question. When you were fasting, were you doing it for yourselves or for me? When you were worshipping, were you doing it for yourselves or for me, when you served, were you serving me or your own need to serve?.*"

**Pursuing Religion**

When we note the tone of the question though its obvious that the Lord knows the answer anyway. Here they were hoping to get out of fasting, they showed their hope to stop when they said they had done it for "*so many years*" or in other words, "*surely enough is enough.*"

**4:** If God is only interested in our hearts, do you think he is always pleased and glorified through our worship?

**5:** How can we know whether our actions are for God or merely ourselves?

**6:** How does God use difficult times of brokenness and hardship to produce fruitfulness in us? Can you share from experience?



Is there anything you most want to put into practice as a result of this study?



## Looking Upwards (40 mins) Bible Study

Read the text for this study, and any references given, then answer the following questions. You may find it helpful to listen to the sermon and/or read through the sermon notes as you do so. Discuss some, or all, your answers with your Home Group and, remember, these questions are only a guide to start your discussions.

**1:** What is your experience with fasting? Do you see it as part of a healthy Christian spiritual life, or something you do to get healthy spiritually?

**2:** See the quote by Jaroslav Pelikan and discuss what it is you value in our traditions and what dangers you observe in traditionalism.

**3:** When was the last time you questioned and examined your motivation for what you do for the Lord?

In fact they may have saved themselves the time and effort and not fasted on all those occasions in the first place as God had sussed them out, they were not doing it for Him they were doing it to satisfy their own need to observe their own religious rituals and traditions. It was all a waste of time, the Lord had turned his face from their “sacrifice.” For many of the Jews at the time, fasting 4 times a year had become nothing more than a meaningless tradition, they did it because they always did it. It made them feel good about themselves. They were serving God, but for many they were really serving themselves. God knew that there was a trend toward ritualism on the part of His people, they fell easily into following patterns of ritual and routine which resulted in their own worship having no meaning at all. Over time they could easily feel at home with traditions belonging to other gods and observe man-made rules as if it was true worship. It was symptomatic of the deep evil that was infesting the nation. So God chastised them and reminded them that he always chooses an obedient heart above any act of sacrifice or religious activity.

Surely this is a message for Christians everywhere and in any age and one that again and again we fail to listen to. I wonder if we can think of ways that we put religious activity and tradition in place of the obedient heart that God wants from us. Perhaps its time for us to reflect on and think about how we serve and even on how we do church. Who are we serving in the ways we do things? Are we serving God and the community, or are we serving ourselves and doing things because its the way we like them done, and are we simply serving the traditions we follow?

### Tradition v Traditionalism

We have patterns of worship that we follow and an order of service is essential to help us in our worship but do we sometimes do things the way we do, because that’s the way we always do them? Is God and his mission being well served, is God’s Holy Spirit eased out at times by our rigidity? Do we truly sing our worship songs and hymns from our hearts? Does God have our attention, and would any visitor be bowled over by the presence of Jesus during our services? With religious traditions and observances we need to ask ourselves- is God among us and is He being honoured, because it is what is going on in our hearts that is what counts. Theologian Jaroslav Pelikan once said, “*Tradition is the living faith of the dead. Traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.*”

By that he meant that tradition is what those who have gone before us have done to express their own living faith in the living God. Traditions that they themselves established because it was relevant to them in their own hearts and worship of the Lord. However, traditionalism is when we take what has been done before by others and make it our own and then and go through the motions without considering the meaning and whether or not its actually relevant to us and our efforts to reach others with the gospel of Christ. We do it because its always been done that way, but are our hearts engaged by it? By following our traditions are we reaching others living in a different time, people who have different needs and issues, are our traditions relevant and meaningful in a different time? Are we doing what we do for God or for ourselves? As 1 Samuel 16:7 says, “*Man looks on the outward appearance, but God looks on the heart.*” God has always defined true worship as something that is from the heart, not a routine, not a performance and that is precisely one of the messages that this chapter wants to give.

Zechariah 7 is asking us some difficult questions we all need to reflect on individually and only we and God know what is in our heart but in order to be confident that our worship pleases God we need to be sure that what we are doing is in order to give God honour and glory and to draw near to Him. The passage goes on to describe the people before the exile, see Ch 7 vs 11-14 where God accuses the people saying that it was because of their hard hearts and failure to listen that *they* “*made the pleasant land desolate.*”

What an accusation from God. They had turned their back on Him and God had had enough. He had sent numerous prophets to warn them and ultimately he got angry and scattered them, now they were back having to rebuild the temple as well as their lives.

God's judgment should stand as a warning to nations who are more intent on going their own way and not obeying His. We are to start with our heart and continue with our lifestyle and God gave a series of tests, see Ch 7v8-10 which speak of justice, mercy and compassion; care of widows and orphans, the homeless, the poor and of mutual regard. Instructions which when followed are in contrast to hearts that were *'as hard as flint,'* v12. He gave these tests in order that His people's hearts could meet his holy standards and to make sure that they were not merely being religious but instead pursuing righteousness. If their fathers had listened to God then they would never have gone into captivity in the first place but even now they were not listening, choosing instead to take a ritualistic approach to religion.

### True Religion

This is a message today for all of us who live in the west and say we live in a Christian nation. Alistair Campbell's famous quote should worry us all when as Tony Blair's director of strategy and communications, he intervened in an interview to prevent the Prime Minister from answering a question about his Christianity and Mr Campbell said *"We don't do God."* He was worried in case religion would put off voters. We have an amazing Christian legacy in this country, God has allowed us to prosper and he has protected us. We live in a peaceful civilised country. That doesn't just happen by luck. It happens when a nation administers true justice and shows mercy and compassion to all, when it looks after the widow, the orphan, the foreigner and the poor and when it is a peacemaking force for good, never plotting evil,( v 8-10).

It happens when Christians are bold and when they speak out. When they pray for their nation and they live out their beliefs. When they sacrificially give of their time and resources, and when unbelievers see the presence of Christ in them. We can fast all we want but if our hearts are not right and we don't live as He wants us to then its of no use. It's hard for us to fully comprehend the effect both spiritually and emotionally that their time of captivity in Babylon would have had on the people. God had abandoned them, it was unthinkable. He had taken his hand of blessing away from the Jewish nation and allowed them to be exiled to Babylon because they had hardened their hearts. They called themselves God's chosen people but they did not live it out. Are we so sure that God will not abandon us and that he wont take his hand of protection from us?

Religion is useless unless there is justice, kindness, mercy and compassion in our lives. Those are the things that speak of a transformed heart and of true religion. True religion isn't about going through certain rituals, it is about taking care of orphans and widows. You can't worship God unless your heart is right and so God is simply saying to the people, *"I'm not interested in how many times you fast or feast or whether you stand or bow or pray or how many times you attend church and recite a creed. What I am interested in is what is in your heart and whether I see the spirit of obedience."* In Isaiah 58:3 again the people had bemoaned, *"Why have we fasted,"* they say, *"and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?"* (and God replies) *"Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers."*

In other words your fast may be feeding you spiritually yet your workers are being exploited and perhaps getting it in the neck because your hunger is making you irritable so you take it out on them. Your fast achieves nothing. We say we long for revival, well revival starts with us, God starts with the individual and he starts with our hearts. Tony Blair's advisors may have foolishly encouraged him to go along with the notion that our country doesn't do God but our only real hope today is to *"do God."* God was telling his people that his blessing does not solely attend their activity at the temple, it attends the kind of life they lived.

Chapter 7 is a warning against a ritualistic approach to religion, which in fact was the very thing that brought the captivity they were fasting to commemorate. The reason they fasted was so they would never forget the lessons they had learned, yet they had forgotten them already. Chapter 7 is a call to repentance and a call to true worship. It is a solemn reminder that the fasts had become ritualistic exercises rather than times of sorrow when they focused on God.

### God is Faithful

We started off by thinking that there are times in our lives when we are happy and other times when we are sad, times of feasting and mourning, now we see how God is going to change the people's fasting into times of feasting. In Chapter 8 we see that Zechariah had no doubts that he had a word to deliver and no doubts that the word was from God. Straight away he starts Chapter 8 by saying, *"The words of the Lord Almighty came to me,"* he then goes on to say another 10 times, *"This is what the Lord Almighty says."* There are also a couple of *"declares the Lord "* thrown in as well. There can be no doubt when we read this that God is speaking here and He wants us to be sure what it is He is saying.

He tells his people what he has in store for them and although it involves the restoration of the temple that is only a mere token of what he has in store for them and us. Straight away at the beginning God reminds his people of his jealous love for them, love that moves him to righteous anger and judgment but for God it is not simply a case of Him saying he loves, he manifest his love in great acts of love and in Ch 8 he tells of all that he has planned for those he loves. He makes promises that are so marvellous and inconceivable and beyond anything we could ever dream off. The Lords return is a recurring theme and He promises that he will dwell in Jerusalem. He mentions 2 groups of people generally overlooked, the old and the young and they will all be able to live in the Kingdom without fear, can you imagine, children and old people being able to wander the streets at any time without fear of harm, it sounds too good to be true yet he says *"Is anything too difficult?"* No, nothing is too hard, nothing is impossible, and the Name of the Lord stands as the assurance that what he says will come to pass. He is faithful!

God always intended that all people from every nation should come to him and he will accomplish this by showing his goodness and mercy through the Jewish nation. He will bless His people and they will become a blessing to all nations. God had judged and punished Israel and they had cause to fear him, but now his anger had passed and he resolved to do good to them and bless them. He tells them, *"Do not be afraid"* but in verses 14-17 he reminds them how to live in order to warn them against repeating the same kind of sinful idolatrous behaviour that got their forefathers into trouble in the first place.

When going through tough times it is often hard to imagine things ever improving. Our lives at times can seem empty, and our days dark and filled with pain. It would have felt like that to the people in captivity, but Zechariah 8 offers us great hope. All of the promises have the fullest completion in the future when Christ returns and there will be no more sadness, sickness and death, our mourning will be turned into laughter, and our sorrow into joy but in the midst of our brokenness, pain and discouragement God can work in us and bring about transformation. He meets with us in those desolate places where we again turn to him and he reminds us that his transformation and blessing comes when we serve him and not ourselves, when we pursue Him instead of empty ritualistic religion and when we listen to His voice and trust His faithfulness instead of relying on our own abilities and failed wisdom.