

# The Books of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi

## Lesson 6: True Fasting, True Justice -- Zechariah 7:1-8:23

Imagine a man who has gone hungry on the same day of the year for seventy years. Every fall, when the anniversary of the temple's destruction comes around, he denies himself food, puts on a sober face, and remembers. His father did it before him, and his grandfather before that. It has become the most reliable thing in his religious life, more dependable than joy, more familiar than prayer. And one day a question forms quietly in the back of his mind: now that things are getting better, now that the temple is rising again from the rubble, do we still have to keep doing this? It is an honest question, and it is the question a delegation carries all the way to Jerusalem to lay before the priests and prophets.

What they get back is not a yes or a no. God answers their question with a question of His own, and it goes straight past their schedule and into their hearts: when you fasted and mourned all those years, was it really for me, or for yourselves? When you ate and drank, were you not simply pleasing yourselves? It is the kind of question that stops you mid-sentence. They had assumed the issue was the calendar, whether to keep the fast or drop it. God tells them the real issue was never the calendar at all. It was the heart behind it, and the life that flowed, or failed to flow, out of that heart.

Then God says what the heart was supposed to produce all along, and it is breathtakingly down to earth. Not more fasting. Not fancier ceremonies. This: render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another, do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and do not even plot evil against your neighbor in your heart. That is what God was after the whole time. The fast was never the point. The fast was supposed to make them into the kind of people who treated the vulnerable with tenderness and dealt with one another in truth. Their ancestors heard this same word from the earlier prophets, and they refused. They turned a stubborn shoulder and stopped their ears, and judgment came.

But the lesson does not end in rubble. Chapter 8 opens like a sunrise. God says He is jealous for Zion, that He will return and dwell in the midst of Jerusalem, that old men and old women will sit in her streets again, each with a staff in hand for very age, and the streets will be full of boys and girls playing. The very fasts of mourning will become feasts of gladness. And the doors will swing open to the nations: people will come from city to city saying, let us go, and ten men from every tongue will take hold of the robe of a single believer and say, let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you. Read this lesson slowly. It will search whether your religion is real, and it will lift your eyes to a God who turns sorrow into joy and gathers the whole world to Himself.

**Group Discussion:** When the delegation asked whether to keep fasting, God redirected them from the question of ritual to the question of the heart and of justice toward the vulnerable (7:5–10). Where do we, like them, tend to measure our spiritual life by the religious activities we perform rather than by the mercy and truth those activities are meant to produce? Why is that substitution so easy to fall into?

**Personal Reflection:** God asked, “When you fasted, was it for me that you fasted?” (7:5). Think honestly about your own acts of worship and devotion this past month. Where might you be going through the motions of religion for your own comfort or reputation while neglecting the kindness, mercy, and justice God actually desires? Be specific with yourself.

*Read Zechariah 7:1–8:23*

## Study Questions

1. A delegation comes to ask the priests and prophets whether they should keep mourning and fasting as they have done for seventy years (7:1–3). What does it reveal about God that He does not simply answer their procedural question, but probes the heart behind it (7:5–6)? What does this teach us about how God evaluates our religious practices?
2. God asked, “When you fasted and mourned... was it for me that you fasted?” and “when you eat and... drink, do you not eat for yourselves?” (7:5–6). If God put that same searching question to your own worship and devotion, what self-serving motives might He expose? Where do you suspect you are doing religious things for yourself rather than for Him?
3. God reminds them of the message of the former prophets, who proclaimed these same words “when Jerusalem was inhabited and in prosperity” (7:7). What is God teaching by pointing back to the consistency of His word through the earlier prophets, and why does He want this generation to remember that He had spoken clearly long before?
4. The heart of God’s reply is intensely practical: “Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another” (7:9). Which of these, true judgment in your dealings, or active

kindness and mercy toward others, is the one you most need to grow in right now? What would real growth there look like this week?

5. God's central ethical demand names specific people: "do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor" (7:10). What does the constant biblical concern for the vulnerable reveal about the character and priorities of God, and how does it expose the difference between mere ritual and true worship (compare Micah 6:8; James 1:27)?
6. God adds, "let none of you devise evil against another in your heart" (7:10). True religion reaches even into our private, hidden thoughts toward people. What is one relationship where you have been quietly nursing resentment, plotting how to get even, or rehearsing grievances in your heart? What does God ask of you there?
7. The previous generation "refused to pay attention," "turned a stubborn shoulder," "stopped their ears," and "made their hearts diamond-hard" (7:11–12), and judgment followed. What does this progression teach about how a heart hardens against God, and how does ritual without obedience leave a person exposed rather than protected?
8. In chapter 8 God paints the future with old men and women safe in the streets and boys and girls playing there (8:3–5), and the fasts becoming "seasons of joy and gladness and cheerful feasts" (8:18–19). What does this vivid picture stir in you about the kind of life God wants to give His people? Where do you most long for God to turn your mourning into gladness?

9. The lesson climaxes with the nations streaming in: “Many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the Lord” and “ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying, Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you” (8:20–23). How is this great promise of the gathering of the nations fulfilled, not in a future earthly political restoration of national Israel, but in Christ and the gospel going to all peoples and the church gathered from every nation (compare Matthew 28:18–20; Acts 2; Ephesians 2:11–22)? Why does true worship of God, the heart religion expressed in justice and mercy that this whole passage demands, belong inseparably with this mission to draw the world to Him?
10. Look back across the whole passage, from the delegation’s question about fasting, to God’s call for justice and mercy, to the hardened hearts of the fathers, to the glorious promise of joy and the gathering of the nations. Name one specific way the Lord is using this text to form you, to move you from going through religious motions toward the real worship of a heart that does justice, loves mercy, and walks with Him.

### **Digging Deeper**

**Reflect on these passages:** Micah 6:6–8, what the Lord requires beyond sacrifice, to do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with God; Isaiah 1:11–17, God’s weariness with empty worship and His call to seek justice and care for the oppressed; James 1:27, the religion that is pure and undefiled before God; Matthew 23:23, justice and mercy and faithfulness as the weightier matters of the law; Ephesians 2:11–22, the nations brought near and made one in Christ, the fulfillment of God gathering the peoples to Himself.

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