When Ritualism Replaces Realism
Zechariah 7

In the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector both went to the temple to pray; the Pharisee prayed out of ritualism while the tax collector out of realism (Luke 18:10-14); to the Pharisee religion was a ritual; he was not interested in repentance, humility, love, or compassion; his only interest was reciting his credentials.

The tax collector acknowledged he was a sinner; he showed humility, guilt and conviction and a true heart for God; this parable is a good contrast between ritual and reality.

Scripture warns us about substituting ritualism for reality (2 Timothy 3:5; 2 Corinthians 5:12); the theme of Zechariah 7 is true worship as opposed to going through the motions; it’s when ritualism replaces reality; “Man looks on the outward appearance, but God looks on the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7).

The Inquiry from Babylon (7:1-3)

The concern of the men from Babylon (7:1-3)... It has been two years since Zechariah had his 8 visions and work on the temple is proceeding quite nicely; however there are signs of danger; could the people fall back into the same pattern of the past: “Should I weep at the fifth month and fast as I have done for so many years?” (7:3).

“Do I have to keep the fifth month fast?” God only required fasting on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 23:37); yet the Jews kept adding one fast after another; Zechariah 8:19 mentions fasts on the 4th, 5th, 7th and 10th months; the fast in
question was the 5th month fast; the 5th month was the month of Av and on the 9th of Av 586 BC the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and Solomon’s temple; Zerubbabel’s temple was destroyed by the Romans on the 9th of Av in 70 AD, the two temples were destroyed on the same day 656 years apart; the fast referred to in out text is the destruction of Solomon’s temple.

*The cause of the fasts had long past and it had become a ritual*... There was a day when weeping and fasting was appropriate, but 68 years later it became a tireless ritual; the whole thing was becoming a drag. “Do we have to keep observing this mournful fast ?”

The Ignoring of the Prophets by Judah (7:4-7)

*The response from the Lord (7:4-7)*... “When you fasted in the fifth and seventh months did you really fast for Me--- for Me?....”

The seventh month fast was connected to Gedaliah who was appointed ruler over Judea by Nebuchadnezzar after Jerusalem had fallen (2 Kings 25:22); he was murdered by a group of fanatical zealouous nationalists under the leadership of Ishmael (Jeremiah 40:1--- 41:18); he was part of the last remnant of Jews who were sent off to Egypt (Jeremiah 43).

*The recognition to be made*... We can get very personal at this point; how much of our Christianity has become ritualized instead of being truly realized? Communion (1 Corinthians 11:27-29);baptism; prayer?

For Christians, fasting is never commanded, but suggested (Matthew 6:16); if one chooses to fast it must be for the glory of God and not for show; worship must come from the heart, it has nothing to do with mere rituals.

*The reason for Israel’s weeping and fasting (7:7)*... Israel got themselves into this mess because they ignored the message of the prophets; Judah was prospering,
so when the prophets sounded the alarm that judgment was coming, they laughed it off; is this not a message for our nation? Only when the temple fell was there sorrow; then they mourned and fasted; but after 68 years of fasting there was no true sorrow; Jews from Babylon had come to Bethel to inquire of the priests, “Do we still have to keep the 5th and 7th months fasts?”

The Instructions to the Men from Babylon (7:8-10)

Zechariah gives a four point plan to replace their weeping and fasting:

1. **Execute true justice** (7:9a; Acts 10:34)...

2. **Exercise mercy and compassion to everyone** (7:9b; John 15:12; Romans 12:3,10)...

3. **Extend a hand to help the widow, the fatherless, the alien and the poor** (7:10a; James 1:27).

4. **Eliminate all evil against your brother** (7:10b; Matthew 5:23-24; 1 Corinthians 11:17-34).

The Indifference of the Men (7:11-12a)

How did the inquirers receive the instruction?

1. **They spurned the word of the Lord** (7:11a; 1 Samuel 15:22)...

2. **They shrugged their shoulders in disbelief** (7:11b)...

3. **They stopped their ears refusing to hear** (7:11c)...

4. **They solidified their hearts like flint** (7:12a)...

The Indignation of God (7:12b-14)
The rejection of God of His people (7:13)...

1. The denial of God to hear their prayers.... “...they called out and I would not listen, says the LORD of hosts” (7:13); there are 10 hindrances to answered prayer in Scripture:

   (1) Unconfessed sin or habitual sin which you have no intention of correcting (Isaiah 59:1-2).
   (2) Unresolved issues with your spouse that creates friction at home (1 Peter 3:7).
   (3) Uncertainty about God’s ability to answer your prayers (James 1:6-7).
   (4) Unwillingness to forgive someone for what they did to you even though they are sorry (Mark 11:25; Luke 17:3-4).
   (5) Impatience in receiving your answer (James 1:3).
   (6) Inattention to what you are saying by not being alert or having a drifting mind (Matthew 26:41).
   (7) Indolence of spirit where there is no earnestness or sincerity about the prayer (Luke 22:44; James 5:17-18; Colossians 4:12).
   (8) Ignorance on what to ask by making selfish requests (James 4:3).
   (9) Redundant phrases that have become a ritual (Matthew 6:7).
   (10)Refusing to keep on asking until God answers (Luke 11:5-10;18:1-8).

2. The dissemination of Judah to foreign nations .... “But I scattered them with a whirlwind among the nations” (7:14a; Deuteronomy 28)... The Jews today are few in number after a worldwide scattering of 1878 years; there are only 13 million Jews worldwide (Deuteronomy 28:62).

3. The dessolation of the land... “Thus the land became desolate after them, so that no one passed through or returned, for they made the pleasant land desolate” (7:14b).

The response from God’s people that He expects... He wants us to get away from meaningless gestures and to have a relationship with Him that comes from the heart; ask yourself: “What do I do that is done more out of habit than out of heart?”
It is easy to turn Christianity into a religion; religions are nothing but rituals; Christianity is a relationship with a living God; “Man looks on the outward appearances, but God looks on the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7). Amen!