

Zechariah 7

## How God Wants us to Respond to Crisis

In times of crisis, most people shift into self-preservation mode; it is everyone for themselves, they begin hoarding, they take advantage of other people's misfortune and weakness in order to strengthen their own position, they may look for a safer place to live; it is all about taking care of Me.

But in times of crisis, Jesus calls His followers to deny ourselves, take up our cross (demonstrating willingness to lose our life), and follow Him out into the danger, like sheep among wolves, on a rescue mission.

In times of crisis, we are to go to the poor and proclaim to them the good news about Jesus;

We are to reach out to the brokenhearted and minister healing;

To proclaim the way of liberty to those in captivity, to bring recovery of sight to those who are blind;

To set free those who are oppressed; and to proclaim the soon coming of the Lord. (Luke 4:18-19)

In the midst of the storm, while others are hunkering down, Jesus sometimes calls us to get out of the safety of the boat and walk on the water.

He calls us to reach out and touch the highly contagious leper everyone else stays away from.

He calls us to cross the sea, seek out, find and deliver the violent and dangerous man possessed with a legion of demons that all others fear.

As you read through the Bible you discover that times of crisis were often times when God did some of His greatest acts through those who would trust Him.

Think of **Moses** delivering Israel from slavery in Egypt,

or **David** fighting Goliath to save Saul's army,

or **Esther** confronting Haman to save her people from a planned Holocaust,

or **Nehemiah** rebuilding the destroyed walls of Jerusalem while their enemy stood by and watched, powerless to stop him.

In Zechariah chapter 7, we are introduced to a group of men who come to Jerusalem seeking advice from the spiritual leaders concerning their annual time of fasting.

When they were still captives living in Babylon, they had begun setting aside a set time, during the fifth month of each year, to commemorate the anniversary of the destruction of Jerusalem and the destruction of Solomon's Temple by the Babylonians.

They set aside this time each year for a period of fasting, to remember and mourn the loss of, not only their temple and holy city, but the loss of their kingdom.

(To this day, the kingdom has never been restored to Israel, they have never had their own king, since the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem.)

But now they were back in their homeland, after 70 years of captivity, and the new Temple was under construction and would soon be completed. (*As per Ezra 4:24 and 6:15*)

Therefore, they thought that since the Temple would soon be completed, there was no longer any need for them to continue to fast and mourn over the old destroyed temple—since it seemed that the good times were being restored to Israel.

Their question, “Was everything going back to normal? Is everything good again between us and God? Can we stop fasting and get back to kingdom living that we once enjoyed?”

It seems that, 500 years later, Jesus' disciples had a similar thought in their minds as it seemed to them also that, that after so many years of Gentile oppression, the good times were surely about to be restored to Israel.

*Acts 1:6, "Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, "Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?""*

We are going to make application from Zechariah chapter seven, to our situation today.

There are also some optimistic souls, who are enjoying the relief of Covid restrictions being lifted, and are encouraged, hearing our Premier assuring us that this is a permanent lifting.

Some are thinking that the good times are about to be restored to Alberta.

Is our crisis over? Is everything going back to normal? Is God's judgment of our nation ending? Have we learned our lesson? Is everything good again between us and God?

But the Lord spoke through the prophet Zechariah, in chapter 7, to give the people a reality check—the Kingdom of God was far from being restored.

Does this same reality check apply to us today in the summer of 2021?

The thick smoke of wild fires burning all around us, and the farmers' crops withering away with drought, and soaring prices everywhere, should alert us that the Lord's favor has perhaps not returned to our land.

***Zechariah 7:1, "Now in the fourth year of King Darius it came to pass that the word of the Lord came to Zechariah, on the fourth day of the ninth month, Chislev..."***

Translated into our calendar the date this prophecy was given is, December 7, 518 B.C.

***Zechariah 7:2-3, "when the people sent Sherezzer, with Regem-Melech and his men, to the house of God, to pray before the Lord, <sup>3</sup> and to ask the priests who were in the house of the Lord of hosts, and the prophets, saying, "Should I weep in the fifth month and fast as I have done for so many years?"***

As I had mentioned already, the Jews had established a religious tradition of fasting on the ninth day of the fifth month, which was the date that the Babylonians destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem.

It is interesting to note the significance of the date, the fourth day of the 9<sup>th</sup> month, the date that the Babylonians destroyed the first Temple, this was the same date, hundreds of years earlier, the Israelites were cursed to spend 40 years wandering in the wilderness, following their unbelief and rebellious refusal to enter the Promised Land.

And then on the anniversary date of the destruction of the first temple, the Romans destroyed the second Temple, on the exact same day, the 9<sup>th</sup> day of the fifth month, in 70 A.D. (*David Baron, p. 214*)

These three major acts of God's judgment on Israel, occurring on the same date, hundreds of years apart, indicate that His judgments are not random, but He is following a scheduled plan.

For over 70 years the Jewish people had practiced this fast to mourn for the destroyed Temple, and now they want to know if they can discontinue the practice.

"Can we stop mourning the loss of our kingdom? It seems like it is being restored, are we finally going back to normal—the way things used to be?"

Before looking at God's answer to this question we need to look at why the people of Israel had gone through this crisis in the first place, and what was the Lord seeking to accomplish in them through this crisis?

Ever since the time of King Solomon, the majority of the people of Israel and Judah had either dabbled in idolatry or they had plunged hard-core into idolatry.

Meaning, they put their trust in, and pursued, other things to meet their needs, rather than the Lord their God who had created them and loved them.

In short, they rejected the Lord's love for them and did not love Him in return.

They didn't want anything to do with their God, because they believed the lie of Satan, that life would be better without God.

Satan says we will be much better off without believing in God.

Get rid of the Bible's instruction for marriage and family, for government and education.

The enemy says, "Make your own laws; reject what God says you are, you can choose your own identity, you can live the way you want to live, reject His definition of right and wrong.

The enemy lies, saying, we can be our own God. We can eradicate poverty and racial injustice. We can control disease; we can even control the climate and save the planet. Who needs a Savior?

This rejection of God is why God brought judgment upon Israel, and this is why God is bringing judgment upon our nation.

To answer the question, "Can we go back to normal now?" we must first answer the question, have we as a nation repented of our rejection of God?

God always follows a similar pattern when He brings judgment upon a nation, this is how it played out with Israel:

Before cutting His rebellious people off completely, the Lord graciously began letting them get a taste of what life apart from God would be like, giving them a chance to see that they were believing a lie.

He gave them a chance to repent and come back to Him. When they didn't repent, He allowed another crisis, and then another to come upon their land, with each new crisis their lives became harder as they drifted further from the protection of their God.

This is what the Lord is doing to our world today. He is giving us a taste of what our world is asking for—life without God, and a world without any of God's laws.

Therefore, to give Israel a taste of life without God, He allowed droughts and famine to plague their land.

He allowed incurable disease to sweep through their cities and villages. And He permitted their enemies to come and take everything they owned, and to burn down their homes, and to kill many of them.

And God is beginning to give our country a taste of what life without Him will be like.

God is after our hearts. God wants our love. God wants the people to come back to Him and to trust Him to provide everything that they were trying to get apart from Him.

Then when the people of Israel lost everything, and were living as captives in a foreign land, they mourned and fasted to demonstrate that they were sorry.

God began returning some of His blessings. He returned some of them to their land. But God sees the heart and He knew they really didn't want Him. They just missed His good blessings and wanted that back again.

***Zechariah 7:4–6, "Then the word of the Lord of hosts came to me, saying, <sup>5</sup>"Say to all the people of the land, and to the priests: 'When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months during those seventy years, did you really fast for Me—for Me? [Is it really Me that you long for...or do you just want the good life, and the strong economy that you enjoyed when I was taking care of you?]' <sup>6</sup>When you eat and when you drink, do you not eat and drink for yourselves?"***

Not only were the people fasting on specific days to show that they were sorry, but they began keeping the Lord's religious feasts—the holy days.

But in verse six the Lord challenges the sincerity and motive of their resumed religious practices.

They have no heart for the Lord, they are just going through the motions to try to trick Him into thinking they love Him so that they can get back from Him the good stuff He had stopped blessing them with.

But God sees right through it all. He sees the hearts of the people. They are doing this fasting and celebrating the holy feasts for selfish motives, not for love of God.

They are doing it as their own religious act of good works that they think earns them favor with a God they do not love, but only want to take advantage of.

***1 Corinthians 10:31***, sums up the heart motivation the Lord is looking for in our acts of worship. *"Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."*

To do all for the glory of God means your motivation is that God's purposes and God's objectives would be accomplished through your activity, therefore you are yielding your will to His, and saying, "Lord, I am all yours, accomplish through me whatever You want to accomplish in this situation."

I am fasting to demonstrate that I am willing to deny the desires and cravings of my flesh in order to give priority to You, Lord, and to say, "No," to me, so that You, Lord, can have Your way.

And when I participate in a religious holiday, and I eat and drink, it is because I am choosing to join You in enjoying and celebrating something that is important to You, Lord, and therefore it is important to me, because I love You.

To glorify God is to demonstrate through my life and through my choices that God is better and more satisfying than anything else in life, and that God's ways are better than the world's ways.

And therefore, I gladly choose Him and His ways as a declaration to the world that this is the best and most satisfying way, everything else is less.

***Zechariah 7:7, "Should you not have obeyed the words which the Lord proclaimed through the former prophets when Jerusalem and the cities around it were inhabited and prosperous, and the South and the Lowland were inhabited?"***

The Lord reminds Israel that before their Babylonian captivity when they were living prosperously in all the cities of Israel, the Lord had spoken to warn the people through the former prophets, that if they continued on their chosen path of rebellion, they would lose all the good things that they were enjoying.

The implication is that if they had believed and obeyed God's words, they would still be enjoying the blessings of those good old days.

But the people did not obey the words that were proclaimed back then.

And Zechariah reminds them that the destruction of their cities, and of their Temple and the loss of everything they had was all the consequence of not believing that God was good, and His word true.

Instead, they believed and followed the lies of the enemy saying, "Come follow me over here, away from God, this is a better way to live."

So how should we respond in a time of crisis, such as our nation is in right now? What is God looking for? What is He seeking to accomplish in us through this crisis? How can we cooperate with Him, and give Him what He desires? What posture do we take for our own protection and well-being?

The following verses reveal that God desires us to yield to Him our lives. He wants us to let Him fill us with His Spirit and express His character, His nature, and His love through us.

***Zechariah 7:8–10, "Then the word of the Lord came to Zechariah, saying, <sup>9</sup>"Thus says the Lord of hosts: 'Execute true justice, show mercy and compassion everyone to his brother. <sup>10</sup>Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the [foreigner immigrant] or the poor [In a time of crisis there will be an abundance of these kind of people who will be most at risk of exploitation by the enemy.]. Let none of you plan evil in his heart against his brother.'"***

This is an abbreviation of a very similar message that was spoken by the prophet Isaiah when he was warning Israel, before the Babylonian captivity, of what kind of fasting He was wanting them to do.

Let's look at Isaiah's longer version which will help us interpret verses 9 and 10 of Zechariah.

This is a description of the life and activity God desires to express through His people, especially in times when a nation is coming under the judgment of God, which was also the context of Isaiah's message.

***Isaiah 58:6–8, "“Is this not the fast that I have chosen* [here is the kind of fasting God has called us to in times of national crisis, not merely fasting from eating food, but a fasting, or denying yourself of what you want so that you can spend yourself on others.**

***“...to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and that you break every yoke?***

[Fasting from indulging in always spending your free evening or weekend on yourself at home but instead spending your life on others to set captives free from the bondage of sin, addiction, demonic powers, and abuse]

***<sup>7</sup> “Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,***

[This is the kind of fast God has called us to—not merely avoiding food, but going without a meal so that you can give it to someone else who is hungry—this is costly. This is the kind of thing the Spirit of God will do through you when you live to prove that He is better than food.]

***“...and that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out;***

[Not just sending them to the shelter downtown, but inviting them into your home, giving up your privacy, and sharing with them God's home, and the life and love of Jesus.

Sharing the life of Jesus is better than selfishly enjoying my own stuff.]

***“...when you see the naked, that you cover him,***

[This means spend money you would have otherwise spent on you, to give them some good clothes. Demonstrating that experiencing Jesus' life working through me, is better than focusing on keeping me in trendy clothes.]

***“...and not hide yourself from your own flesh?***

[This means do not ignore or try to avoid relatives who need your help. This can get very costly, spending on them money that you were maybe saving up to buy something nice for yourself.

This is the kind of fast God has called us to...showing that letting the Lord have His way through our lives is better than anything I was planning to buy.]

***<sup>8</sup>Then your light*** [your experience of salvation, the evidence or display of God's life in you] ***shall break forth*** [shine forth] ***like the*** [rising sun in the] ***morning, your healing*** [from the past effects of unbelief and disobedience] ***shall spring forth speedily, and your righteousness shall go before you***

[this indwelling life of Christ being expressed through you will lead you in the right way. Confusion and uncertainty about what way to go in the crisis will disappear.];

***"...the glory of the Lord*** [the display of God's goodness in your life] ***shall be your rear guard*** [it will protect you from behind—no need to be fearfully looking back over your shoulders for danger—God will have your back in the crisis]."

This makes the Jews one day of fasting once a year to mourn all the good things they were missing because of the loss of the temple and their kingdom, look pretty lame and unfulfilling compared to what the Lord intended to be their experience.

Likewise, the Lord does not intend us to focus on the good times of the "old normal" we have lost. He wants us to deny ourselves, give Him our life, and let Him fill us with His Spirit, and begin living His life through our bodies.

***Zechariah 7:11–12, "But they refused to heed, shrugged their shoulders, and stopped their ears so that they could not hear. <sup>12</sup>Yes, they made their hearts like flint*** [ESV – diamond hard], ***refusing to hear the law and the words which the Lord of hosts had sent by His Spirit through the former prophets. Thus great wrath came from the Lord of hosts."***

If our churches and our nation refuse to believe that God is the source of all goodness and of all life, but continue to stubbornly try to find a better life apart from God, then God will let us experience exactly what we are asking for—life without God.

When that begins to happen that is what the Bible describes as the wrath of God.

One of the terrible moral consequences of repeatedly failing to obey the will of God is that the more of God's word you ignore, the duller your perceptions become, so that in the end you become spiritually blind and your heart becomes hardened against the conviction and prompting of the Holy Spirit so that you feel nothing from God.

There was a reason why God said of lukewarm Christianity, in ***Revelation 3:15-16***, ***"I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! <sup>16</sup> So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth."***

Then comes the wrath of God, which is God withdrawing His grace and blessing from your life and you suffer the painful consequences of your disobedience.



This is the sad end of many compromising, casual Christian lives—they become blind, cold and hard toward the spiritual things of God as a result of a lifetime of being selective in obeying only what is convenient and ignoring the hard teachings of God.

This spiritual hardness can be avoided by always seeking to be obedient to the word of the Lord—something that can only be done by being yielded to and dependent upon the Holy Spirit.

***Zechariah 7:13, "Therefore it happened, that just as He proclaimed and they would not hear, so they called out and I would not listen," says the Lord of hosts."***

Stubborn disobedience on our part results in God no longer listening to our prayers.

***Zechariah 7:14, "But I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations which they had not known. Thus the land became desolate after them, so that no one passed through or returned; for they made the pleasant land desolate.""***

Israel has been scattered from her land because of disobedience of God's word.

They were removed and scattered by the Assyrians and Babylonians. Then they later were removed and scattered by the Romans and they remained scattered until the Lord restored their nation in 1948 and He has been steadily bringing them back to their land since then.

***"Thus the land became desolate after them..."***

It is interesting to note that, "Whenever the Jewish people were dispossessed from their land, it became desolate and undeveloped. The only time the land blooms is when the Jewish people are in it. The past 1,900 years have shown this to be the case. With the return of the Jewish people in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Israel has come alive and continues to be a modern, thriving country." (*David Levy, p. 72*)

***Luke 9:23, "Then He said to them all, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me."***

***Matthew 16:25, "For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it."***

*Copyright © 2021 by Parkdale Grace Fellowship Permission: You are permitted to reproduce and distribute this material in any format, provided that you do not alter the wording in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. Unless otherwise noted, Scripture taken from the New King James Version. Copyright 1979, 1980, 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved*

