

Zechariah 7

Discussion Questions

These questions are provided by the Connection-Group Committee for groups which would like to continue thinking about and discussing the passage used in today's sermon.

Many of the Jews have returned from exile in Babylon and are rebuilding the temple. They ask whether they should still fast every August (the "third month"), on the anniversary of the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple. (Scholars debate what was being recalled by the fasts in the other months, but they were probably also related to the fall of Jerusalem and the exile.)

1. Fasting in the Old Testament is related to mourning, to humbling and purifying one's self, and is used when seeking discernment from God. The delegation is asking whether their annual fasts should cease now that the temple is being rebuilt and the exiles have returned. What does this indicate about their intentions in fasting?
2. What complaint does the prophet Zechariah make about their fasting?
3. Jesus warns his disciples against fasting for the wrong reasons and losing their "reward" (Matt 6:16-18). C. S. Lewis once wrote, "The proper rewards are not simply tacked on to the activity for which they are given, but are the activity itself in consummation." What are the proper "rewards" for fasting which would be prevented by bad motives?
4. What is your experience with fasting? Do you think of fasting as part of a healthy Christian spiritual life, or is it something you do to *get* healthy spiritually? It is food or medicine?
5. D. A. Carson writes, "Does our religion elevate ritual above morality? That is the burden of Zechariah's stinging review of earlier Jewish history (7:8-12)." Zechariah wants to know whether it's become more important for them to follow the right rituals than it is to "show kindness and mercy to one another" (7:9).

Our religious practices are very different from theirs: they fasted, made sacrifices, celebrated feasts, etc. We attend church, serve on committees and attend prayer groups and bible studies, tithe, volunteer to serve others, sing in the choir, etc. What would be the signs that your religious observances have begun to trump kindness and mercy?

6. Zechariah doesn't deliver a direct answer from God in chapter 7, but does in the next chapter. Can you guess from this chapter what God's answer will be? Once you have your guess, read 8:18-19. Were you right?