

Zechariah Series: Fasting & Feasting: What is Religion?

For Sun 3rd May

1, What is Religion?

Then the word of the Lord Almighty came to me: ‘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? (Zech.7:4-6 NIV)

I’m sure my question instantly conjures up thoughts and maybe pictures of what religion is. It is a question consistently explored throughout scripture.

Still today fasting is associated with religion. Rabbi Zev Farber and his fellow doctorate Malka Simkovich say the practice of fasting was as a reaction to a catastrophic event or a harsh decree, citing both the Babylonian destruction and response to Haman’s decree against the Persian Jews during the reign of the next King (see Esther 4:1-3). Fasting was used ‘as a public statement [...], hoping to convince God to help.’ⁱ

Is this religion: the way of self-denial with a set pattern of fasts aiming to persuade the Lord of inner righteousness...

Bear Grylls, former elite soldier and an adventurer said,

‘I don’t turn to God to be religious. In fact, I really battle with religion as such. It seems so divisive and full of rules.’ⁱⁱ

The Lord’s question was in response to a question. Men from Bethel asked Zechariah if they should mourn and fast in the fifth month as they had done for so many years, but the Lord asked, ‘was it really for me that you fasted?’ (v5) The reason the people mourned and fasting was because Solomon’s temple had been destroyed. The place that signified God being with the people was gone and so, throughout their exile the Israelites remembered their great loss by instituting a fast.

The exception was the festival of Yom Kippur, an annual day of atonement when the people would be cleansed and were told by the Lord to observe it as a day of sabbath rest where they must deny themselves (See Lev.16:30). Here, fasting serves as a reminder that all we have comes from the Lord.

Is this religion? A life pattern of fasting to persuade the Lord to forgive.

Interestingly, when Rabbi Farber and his colleague Malka report on those historical practices they make this admission, ‘Strikingly, none of these passages mentions *teshuvah*, repentance.’ⁱⁱⁱ

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I was surprised because in my mind the act of fasting to entreat the Lord is an act of turning to him. However, they go on to describe fasting as a focus on holiness and separation, exemplifying the disciples of John who continued the practice of the Pharisees^{iv} (see Matt.9:14).

Their question was not an open question, ‘ooh, we notice a difference in religions practice and wonder why it is that we fast?’ but rather an accusation, ‘how is it we fast but you don’t!?’ The subtext was their fasting demonstrated their righteousness whereas Jesus and his disciples lack of fasting suggested they were unrighteous. (See Matt.11:19)

This fasting appeared as religious, but it was a corrupted religion. A tool to convince themselves and others of personal righteous it was not really about repentance (turning to God, seeking to do *his will* and follow *his ways*).

The men who came to Zechariah genuinely mourned the loss of the temple which represented God being with them and religiously kept their fast. Nothing wrong with that motivation! Now that a replacement temple was under construction, could they stop?

However, they had neither repented of their own desecration of the temple by their idol worship (see Ezekiel 1) nor of deserting the Lord’s ways in favour of their own. The outward appearance of religion was not matched by an inward drive to administer the Lord’s justice and so the Lord questioned them, ‘was it really for me that you fasted?’ (v5)

Fasting is a part of religion but does not define religion. Fasting as a reaction to terrible events or as a promise to the Lord is good. However, its focus should always be on seeking the Lord’s will to be done in us and on Earth. When Jesus spoke of it he did so alongside the administering of justice through giving to the needy and praying for the Lord’s kingdom on earth (see Matt.6), exactly as the word spoken to Zechariah...

2, What does the Lord say is True Religion?

And the word of the Lord came again to Zechariah: ‘This is what the Lord Almighty said: “Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another” (Zech.7:8-9 NIV)

This is not as easy as it sounds. In fact, I think it a very thorny issue.

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In the very next line, the Lord gives examples of how to administer his justice, ‘Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against one another.’ (v10 NIV)

There is a tension between what we consider lawful or legal and true religion.

This tension shows itself in two ways,

- either an over-zealous application of law, forgetting the humanness of the other
- or the opposite; an over-zealous application of mercy and compassion, without the foundation of God’s law.

In our faith community we seek to discern wisely, in the light of both the Lord’s law and practice of administration. We look to Jesus as the ideal but even then, there are numerous difficulties.

Many of us will have personal examples of how the people of the church has hurt one another. It may be through misunderstanding, disagreements on a biblical issue, unrealistic expectations of others or the plain old inability to practice humility, because the self always tries to assert itself. How many of us can truly say we have lived up to religion as Paul taught the church at Phillippi, saying

‘Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.’ (Philippians 2:3-4 NIV)

And ‘Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, ‘children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.’” (Philippians 2:14-15 NIV)

This is why I said the administration of true religion is not as easy as it sounds and is a thorny issue.

If we struggle to do this within church community it must come as no surprise to us that it is even harder in public society. I know of no nation, including that of the Israelite people who can say without doubt that they have kept to the Lord’s command,

Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. ‘Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against one another.’ (Zech.7:9-10 NIV)

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There are moments of good example among the Israelites, especially in people such as Job, Esther & Mordecai, plus the ministries of Zechariah, Haggai, Zerubbabel and Nehemiah; all involved in the rebuilding. Overall, the Israelites failed to sustain the Lord's administration of true religion, hence their being made exile in the time of Jeremiah and the Lord's reprimand even in the time of Zechariah when a new temple was being built.

I find it rather depressing. So, what are we to do? How are we to administer the true religion of the Lord's justice? Let's get some good news as I also offer some thoughts on how...

3, What is the outcome of True Religion?

This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'Many peoples and the inhabitants of many cities will yet come, and the inhabitants of one city will go to another and say, "Let us go at once to entreat the Lord and seek the Lord Almighty. I myself am going." And many peoples and powerful nations will come to Jerusalem to seek the Lord Almighty and to entreat him.' (Zech.8:20-22 NIV)

When true religion is administered it creates a beautiful community that others greatly desire to be part of. Perhaps not in Zechariah's time but certainly in the time of Jesus we see this realised in part for many people went to Jerusalem for the festivals of Passover and Pentecost.^v

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey during Passover preparation Jews of many nations were there to observe or join in the Passover celebration alongside some gentile converts. It is easy for me to imagine them saying to each other, "Let us go at once to entreat the Lord and seek the Lord Almighty. I myself am going." (v21). Likewise, fifty days later, on the day of Pentecost, the apostle Peter spoke to a crowd of thousands.

Yet even then, the promise through Zechariah was not fully fulfilled for the temple building is still not yet complete. What is this temple? It is the temple the Lord continues to build by his Spirit, (see Zech.6:13) and it is none other than our Lord Jesus being the Temple and his followers the building blocks of it.

As the apostle Peter later says, 'you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house (or temple) to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.' (1 Pet.2:5 NIV)

This is very good news! Although by our own strength we cannot administer true religion, the Lord has great confidence in us and enables his will to be done in his world through his Spirit.

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Without doubt true religion is deeply challenging,

‘Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.’ (Philippians 2:3-4 NIV)

And ‘Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, ‘children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.’ (Philippians 2:14-15 NIV)

‘Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against one another.’ (Zech.7:9-10 NIV)

The outcome is that when true religion is administered it creates a beautiful community that we all greatly desire to be part of.

Let us, therefore determine to be a people of true religion, led by his Spirit to witness the building of his temple of beautiful communities. *amen*

ⁱ Zev Farber, Malka Z. Simkovich, “Why Jews Fast” *The Torah.com* (2015).

<https://thetorah.com/article/why-jews-fast>

ⁱⁱ Bear Grylls, *Soul Fuel: A Daily Devotional* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2019), p2.

ⁱⁱⁱ Farber & Simkovich

^{iv} Farber & Simkovich

^v Passover was remembrance of the escape from Egypt while Pentecost was an agricultural festival, fifty days later, to give thanks for the harvest.