True Fasting
Zechariah 7:1-14

When you hear the word **fast**, what activity do you imagine in your mind?

- For some it will be the fast runner
- For others it will be the fast car

What about the deliberate restriction of food for a period of time?

That's also what the word fast means. To fast or to be involved in fasting is a spiritual discipline that is part of the story of God's people in both parts of the Bible.

For some of us here this morning fasting is a very normal and regular part of our Christian experience. However, for others I suspect it may be very unfamiliar.

What is fasting? Fasting is about voluntarily going without food for the sake of some spiritual purpose.

Fasting is not about losing weight. That is called **dieting**.

Fasting is not about becoming healthier after a period of indulgence. That is called **detoxing**.

Fasting is about abstaining from food for the sake of some spiritual purpose.

There are **different reasons why people fast** in the Bible. For example:

- To express sadness, sorrow and a serious desire to change

- To seek God's guidance
- To seek God's protection
- To show dedication to God
- To increase our reliance on God
- To increase our desire for God

The reason I'm talking about fasting at the start of my sermon is because fasting **is** the presenting issue in **Zechariah chapter 7**.

First, the presenting issue (Vs 1-3)

Look at verse 1. **Read verses 1 to 3.**

We are now in the year 518 BC. The exact date is 7th December.

This is two years since the first collection of visions and it's two years before the temple will be finished.

We're at **the half way point** of this glorious construction project.

It's going well. However, it's raised a question, should we keep on going with these additional fasts?

In the Old Testament, God only required one day of fasting a year. On the day of atonement.

However, since the devastating at the hands of the Babylonians, the people of God had introduced four new fast days. Each of those was linked to a very low moment connected to the destruction of Jerusalem. They had kept these for the last 70 years. However, now the people of God are wondering, is it time to stop them?

What happens next is very positive. The people of Bethel send a delegation to Jerusalem to enquire of the LORD.

This is good news because…

- They genuinely want to know what God thinks. They are not trying to find divine approval for a decision they have already made.

- They go to the right place to enquire. Bethel has a made reputation in the Bible.

The **answer** they receive is not what they expected.

Second, the internal attitude (Vs 4-7)

Look at verse 4. **Read verses 4 to 6**.

How do you respond when someone responds to your question by asking a question of their own? We may not always like it but it's a great way of **digging below the surface** and finding out what is really going on.

This is what God does with the question of fasting.

The **people of Bethel** want to know, should we continue these extra events. However, **the God of the Bible** wants to know, why have they been fasting?

It's easy to do the same thing for very different reasons.

Consider, for example, a big family gathering. Why is everyone in the same room? For a host of reasons. Love. Fear. Connection. Reward.

Or think about feelings of **remorse**. This is our reaction when we offend someone. Normally we feel sad.

But why do we regret what we've done? Is it because we are concerned about the impact of our behaviour on someone else or because we don't like how their reaction has affected us?

Why have the people of God been fasting for 70 years? On the surface we don't really know. Are they simply going through the motions or are their hearts into it? Who are they doing it for? To bring relief to themselves or to please the LORD?

We can't tell from the outside..

Think about today. Why is everyone here? What is everyone thinking about? Only God knows.

That reality can either be **terrifying** or **comforting**.

The posture of our heart matters to God.

He's not just interested in outward show. He wants us to be all in with everything we've got.

Notice that he wants us to want him.

Not just his gifts but him the Giver.

Christmas presents. Our temptation is to grab the gifts and forget the giver.

It's the same with God.

Maybe we think that in return God simply wants us to engage in a few religious activities in a dutiful way.

But no. God says, **I want you to want me.**

He doesn't need us to need him. He's not desperate for love and affection and will feel dissatisfied if we don't adore him. No, he says this for our joy and delight. It's as we love him with all of our heart that our joy is made complete.

This message from Zechariah to the people of Bethel isn't the first time God has raised the question of internal motivation.

Look at verse 7. **Read verse 7.**

At all times we are to seek the Lord from our hearts. It is the consistent message of the Bible. Whether in times of **plenty** or **scarcity**, God wants us to keep our eyes fixed on him as the great provider of his people.

If our hearts aren't **into God** then fasting is irrelevant!

At this point God isn't finished with his answer. We've heard about the importance of internal attitude but now we move onto external actions.

Third, the external actions (Vs 8-10)

Look at verse 8. **Read verses 8 to 10**.

We are saved by faith alone.

Ephesians 2:8-9, "Summarizes the doctrine as: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast."

However, we are not saved by a faith that is alone.

James 2:14-17, “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.”

In **Zechariah chapter 7,** God paints some of the details of the actions that flow from faith.

They are intensely beautiful!

I want to be like this. I want to hang out with people who are like this.

Administer true justice. Treat people fairly. Be impartial.

Show mercy and compassion. The Good Samaritan. Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers? The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.”

Look after the vulnerable.

We need the motivation of the gospel and the presence of the Holy Spirit to live like this!

Without these **external actions**, fasting is useless.

It's not that fasting is useless. It has great value in the kingdom of God but only when combined with **internal attitude** and **external actions.**

Without those fasting is like **a chocolate teapot** or a **radiator made out of ice.**

However, with them it is like a rocket booster for our spiritual growth and development.

As we finish, let's consider what our response should be to this message in **Zechariah chapter 7**?

Fourth, the vital response (Vs 11-14)

Look at verse 11. **Read verses 11 to 14**.

A precious generation heard the same message.

But...

- They refused to pay attention
- They turned their backs
- They covered their ears
- They made their hearts as hard as flint

The consequences of this?

- The LORD Almighty was very angry. No wonder!
- How did he show his anger? When they called, he would not listen.
- He scattered them among the nations.

In short, **how we listen really does make a difference**.

God isn't interested in merely outward religious activities. He knows all and can see all.

He wants you and he wants you to want him.

Come to Jesus with everything you've got!

As we listen, let's be careful what we do with the message.

The wise and foolish builders. **Matthew 7:24-27.**

Let's pray.