

**The Minor Prophets**  
**Lesson 30: Truth, Traditions, And Promises**  
**(Zechariah 7— 8)**

To what extent do the traditions of the past have authority over what the church does today? As times change, should customs also change? And who has the authority to change them? Are religious traditions to remain as they've always been, or can we drop the old ones and begin some new ones?

These are questions that are challenging churches today and even dividing churches, but these questions aren't new. Similar questions were asked centuries ago when Sherezer and Regemelech arrived in Jerusalem from Babylon. The Jews in Babylon had sent them to ask the prophet Zechariah about the traditional Jewish fasts. Zechariah used the opportunity to teach the people about true spiritual worship, and then he turned their eyes away from the past to the promises of the future.

**Problems Concerning Traditions (7:1-14)**

Tradition is a useful and necessary social practice. It helps to tie generations together and keep society moving in a united way. Whether the traditions involve the way we eat and dress, how we treat our parents and family, the way we move from childhood into maturity, or the way we choose a job or a mate, tradition helps to stabilize things and guide us in making acceptable choices. But sometimes tradition creates problem, especially when the times change radically, and people don't want to change with the times.

- a. **The request (vv. 1-3).** Almost two years had elapsed since the crowning of Joshua, and the work of rebuilding the temple had gone on steadily. In another three years, the temple would be completed and dedicated. While we have no recorded messages from Zechariah during that time, certainly he was ministering to the people and encouraging the workers in their important task.
  - i. The law of Moses required the Jews to observe only one national fast, and that was on the annual Day of Atonement (Lev. 23:16-32). But of course, the individual Jews could fast from time to time as they felt led, but this wasn't required of the entire nation.
  - ii. To commemorate events surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, four new fasts had been added to the religious calendar by the Jewish exiles in Babylon (see (Zech. 8:19): one in the tenth month, when the Babylonians had begun the siege of the city; another in the fourth month, when the city walls had been broken through; one in the fifth month, when the temple was burned; and the fourth in the seventh month, when the Jewish governor, Gedaliah, had been assassinated (see Jer. 41).
  - iii. The significant question was "Now that the temple was being rebuilt, was it necessary to continue the fast in the fifth month that commemorated the burning of the temple?"
- b. **The reply (vv. 4-7).** Zechariah didn't give them an immediate reply. In fact, the Lord didn't reveal His will in the matter until later (8:9). It was necessary first to deal with the heart attitudes of the people. After all, our relationship with the Lord isn't so much a matter of traditions and rules as it is faith, love, and a desire to please Him.
  - i. Immature people require religious regulations to tell them what to do, and these regulations help them measure their "spiritual life." But God wants us to mature

spiritually and grow from obeying rules to following principles and cultivating a vital personal relationship with Him.

- ii. In true rabbinical fashion, Zechariah answered their question by asking some questions! In fact, he asked these questions of all the people and priests, for they too had kept these fasts.
  1. “When you fasted,” Zechariah asked, “did you do it for the Lord or for yourselves? And when you feasted, was it for the Lord or for yourselves? What was in your hearts?”
- iii. The prophets who ministered prior to the fall of Jerusalem had taught the people that their religious observances had to come from the heart. To worship God any other way means to practice hypocrisy. As far back as the ministry of Samuel, God told the people that He wanted their obedience and not their sacrifices (1 Sam. 15:22).
- iv. Isaiah and Micah had both proclaimed this message, but the people didn’t listen. Life was peaceful and secure in those days, and it was much easier to maintain the traditions than to really meet with God and have a “heart experience” of worship.
- v. Zechariah wasn’t condemning traditions as such. He was emphasizing the fact that the true spiritual life can’t be turned on and off at our convenience, so that we serve God one minute and forget Him the next.
  1. If we feast, we must do it to glorify God (1 Cor. 10:31).
  2. If we fast, we must do it to honor Him.
  3. The Lord must be the center of our lives and the reason for our actions.
  4. If we keep a fast (or any other religious tradition) just to please ourselves and win the admiration and approval of others, then God is not pleased, and the activity was wasted.
- vi. God’s final answer was given later (Zech. 8:19): All four fasts will one day be turned into feasts! This would take place during the kingdom age when Messiah will sit on the throne, judging with justice and truth.

So, instead of living in the past tense and mourning over calamities, why not live in the future tense and rejoice over what God has promised to do for His people?

- c. **The rebuke (vv. 8—14).** Zechariah reminded the people of the way their forefathers routinely practiced their religion but failed to hear God’s Word and obey it from their hearts.
  - i. Their religion was just part of their lives; it wasn’t the very heart of their lives. They could go to the temple and piously present their prayers and sacrifices, but then leave the temple and break God’s law, worship idols, and abuse other people.
    1. Through the prophets, the Lord had called the people to practice justice, but the leaders had continued to exploit the people for personal gain.
    2. They ignored the law of Moses and refused to show compassion toward the poor, the widows and orphans, and the aliens in the land.
  - ii. The danger of tradition is that it can easily turn into traditionalism. “Tradition is the living faith of the dead,” wrote theologian Jerislav Pelikan: traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.” Traditionalism means going through the outward motions instead of honoring the Lord from our heart; it means participating in a religious event but failing to have an inner spiritual experience.
  - iii. Sometimes the only way the Lord can bring us back to reality is to force us to endure suffering. “Before I was afflicted, I went astray: but now have I kept thy word” (Ps. 119:67).

- iv. The word tradition simply means “that which is passed along.” It comes from a Latin word that means “to hand over.” The basic doctrines of the Christian faith must be handed from generation to generation (2 Tim. 2:2; 1 John 1:1-3; 1 Cor. 11:2; 2 Thess. 2:15), but the customs and traditions of the early church don’t carry the same authority as the inspired Word of God.
- v. In fact, as times change, some of these customs may be detrimental to the works of the Lord.
- vi. Churches are like families; each one has its own set of traditions, many of which may be good. The truths of God’s Word don’t change. But changing circumstances reveal new principles and new applications of that Word. The old Youth for Christ slogan said it perfectly: We must be “geared to the times but anchored to the Rock.”

Jesus dealt with the question of tradition when He was ministering here on earth (Matt 15; Mark 7). He carefully distinguished between the inspired Word of God that never changes and man-made traditions that are always subject to review and revision. Final authority for faith and practice must rest on the Word of God.

“Tradition is a guide and not a jailer,” wrote novelist W. Somerset Maugham, but history reveals that it’s a difficult thing for many people to break with tradition. It’s easier to have a religion of habit than a religion of the heart. Churches, families, and individual believers need to examine their cherished traditions in the light of God’s truth. Perhaps some of our fasts need to be turned into feasts (Zech. 8:18-19)!

### **Promises Concerning Israel (8:1-23)**

God’s people don’t live on explanations, they live on Promises. Faith and hope are nourished by the promises of God given to us in Scriptures. That explains why Zechariah dropped the discussion of the traditions and delivered a new message from the Lord. In this message, he focused the people’s eyes of faith on the future and shared some wonderful promises to encourage them. Note the repetition of the phrase, “Thus saith the Lord,” which is used ten times in this chapter.

- a. **The city of Jerusalem will be rebuilt (vv. 1-6).** God affirmed His jealous love and concern for Zion, just as He had done earlier (1:14). He promises that Jerusalem will be rebuilt and become a wholly different city, dedicated to truth and holiness. This promise will be fulfilled when Jesus Christ returns to earth to establish His kingdom (Isa. 1:26; 2:3; 60:14).
  - i. But the compassionate Lord centers on people and not building, particularly the elderly and the children. He describes a city so safe and friendly that the elderly can leisurely sit in the streets and talk, and where the children can play in the streets and not be in danger.
- b. **The people of Israel will be regathered (v. 7).** True to His covenant, God disciplined His disobedient people and dispersed them throughout the world (Deut. 28:63), but one day, He will regather them to their land and to their Holy City. While groups of Jewish patriots have returned from time to time to their land, the kind of worldwide regathering described by the prophets has never yet occurred.
- c. **The relationship between Israel and Jehovah will be restored (v. 8).**
  - i. The promise “They will be my people” (NIV) reminds us that God claimed the people of Israel as His own. When God delivered Israel from Egyptian bondage, He said to them,

“Obey My voice, and do according to all that I command you; so, shall you be My people, and I will be your God” (Jer. 11:4 NKJV).

- ii. For a time, God abandoned His people because they abandoned Him, and He called them “Lo-Ammi; for you are not My people, and I will not be your God” (Hos. 1:9 NKJV).
- iii. The nation of Israel was punished for her idolatry by being sent into Babylonian captivity. Then she was punished for rejecting her Messiah by being sent into worldwide dispersion.
- iv. One day, God will summon His sons and daughters from afar, and the streets of a restored Jerusalem will be crowded with His people.

**d. The Land of Israel will be refreshed (vv. 9-13).** Haggai had rebuked the Jewish remnant because the people weren’t faithful to the Lord in their stewardship (Hag. 1). Instead of honoring the Lord and building His house, they built their own houses first, and for this sin, God disciplined them.

- i. The weather turned bad, their crops failed, and the economy became worse and worse. God wasn’t being unkind to His people; He was only being true to His covenant (Deut. 28:38-46).
- ii. But now the land would be refreshed by the Lord and the crops would grow abundantly. Laborers would get their wages, and their money would be sufficient to pay their bills. The Lord would send the promised rain (Deut. 28:11-12), and the other nations would witness the blessing of the Lord on His people.
- iii. Instead of being a reproach, Israel would become a witness to the glory of the Lord.
- iv. While this promise of material blessing was given primarily to the remnant in Zechariah’s day, it has its application to the future regathered and restored nation.
- v. There are two facts about material blessings that we must always keep in mind.
  1. First, we don’t obey God just to become wealthy and secure. We obey God because He is God and deserves our loving obedience. Obedience builds character, and when our character is what it ought to be, God can trust us with His blessings. Material blessings aren’t bribes, nor are they rewards. They’re God’s way of saying, “You’re maturing in godliness, and now I can give you more to use for My glory.”
  2. Second, God doesn’t always respond with material blessings, and poverty is not a sign that God has forsaken His people. The experience of Job destroys this commercial idea of faith and obedience. Job’s friends had a commercial view of faith, so they encouraged Job to confess his sins so God could again make him wealthy.
- vi. God’s covenant with Israel declared that He would punish them physically and materially if they disobeyed Him but bless them if they obeyed Him (Deut. 27—28; Lev. 26). However, he has no such covenant with Christian believers today. He promises to meet all our needs (Phil. 4:19) and to direct in all our circumstances (Rom. 8:28), but our riches are of a heavenly nature (Eph. 1:3).

If God chooses to make some of His people wealthy, it’s that they might use what He gives them to help others (1 Tim. 6:17-19). He blesses us that we might be a blessing. However, riches are no proof of God’s special love, nor poverty evidence that He’s forsaken us.

**e. The covenant standards will be rewarded (vv. 14-19).** Whether God is dealing with His people in the Old Testament or New Testament, His standards don’t change. The church today doesn’t live under old covenant law, but “the righteousness of the Law” is still what God wants to

develop in our lives (Rom. 8:1-4). “Be ye holy; for I am holy” is quoted from the Old Testament law for New Testament Christians (Lev. 11:44; 1 Peter 1:15-16).

- i. God reminded His people of their obligations to speak the truth, to practice justice in the courts, to honor His name by not swearing falsely, and to love their neighbors.
- ii. Of course, all the law is fulfilled in our conduct when we practice love (Rom. 13:8-10). The God of love hates sin! (See Prov. 6:16-19).
- iii. In verses 18-19, the prophet clearly answered the question about the fans. The day would come when Messiah would reign, and all Israel’s fasts would become feasts! And I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and joy in my people; and the voice of weeping shall be no more heard in her, nor the voice of crying” (Isa. 65:19).
- iv. Zechariah and Isaiah were both saying, “Don’t live in the past tense; live in the future tense! Rejoice at the promises God gives you for a joyful future!

**f. The Gentiles will be redeemed (vv. 20-23).** God called Abraham and established the nation of Israel so His people would witness to the Gentiles and lead them to faith in the true God (Gen. 12:1-3). In setting apart one nation, God was seeking to reach a whole world. Many great events in Jewish history recorded in Scripture had behind them a witness to “the world”: the plagues of Egypt (Ex. 9:16); the conquest of Canaan (Josh. 4:23-24); God’s blessing of nation (Deut. 28:9-11); and even the building of the temple (1 Kings 8:42-43). When David killed Goliath, he announced that God would give him victory so “that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel” (1 Sam.17:46).

- i. But Israel failed in her mission to the Gentiles. Instead of the Gentile nation coming to worship the true God of Israel, the Jews forsook Jehovah and worshipped the false gods of the Gentile nations.
- ii. The “court of the Gentiles” in Herod’s temple became a market where Jews visiting Jerusalem from other countries could exchange their money and buy approved sacrifices. However, before we criticize the Jews too much, we had better examine the track record of the church when it comes to winning the lost at home and taking the gospel to nations abroad.
- iii. When Messiah restores His people and establishes His kingdom, the Gentiles will trust the true and living God and come to Jerusalem to worship Him.
- iv. It’s a wonderful thing when God so blesses His people that others want what God’s people have. “We have heard that God is with you” (Zech. 8:23).
- v. This sounds like what should happen in our local churches when an unbeliever beholds our worship of the Lord (see 1 Cor. 14:24-25 NIV).

“I say then,” wrote Paul, “has God cast away His people? Certainly not!” Rom. 11:1 NKJV). There’s a bright and blessed future for God’s people Israel, even though the nation has been oppressed and persecuted by the Gentiles, some of whom claimed to be Christians. Our privilege is to love them, pray for them, and tell them that their Messiah, Jesus Christ, has come and will save them if they will trust Him. The gospel of Christ is still “the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek” (Roman. 1:16 NKJV).

Homework: Read **Zechariah 9—11**. Study title: Messiah, The Shepherd-King