

**International Sunday School Lesson  
Study Notes  
August 23, 2015**

**Lesson Text: Zechariah 7:8-14  
Lesson Title: God Demands Justice**

**Introduction**

Cyrus the king of Persia defeated Babylon in 539 B.C. and issued a decree that the Jews in captivity could return to Palestine and rebuild the temple (Ezra 1:1-3). Around 536-538 B.C., about 50,000 Jews returned from Babylonian captivity to their homeland. Once they returned, the people rebuilt the altar and began to lay the foundation for the temple (Ezra 3:3, 8-10). But when the people who lived in Palestine before the Jews returned wanted to join in the rebuilding, Zerubbabel and Jeshua refused to cooperate. As a result, the work on the temple came to a halt for nearly two decades.

In the year 520 B.C., during the reign of Darius I, the Lord sent the prophet Zechariah to begin a prophetic ministry to the returning Jews. The prophet Zechariah was one of the post-exile prophets along with Haggai and Malachi. He was probably from a priestly family (Nehemiah 12:4, 16) and he, along with Haggai, played a key role in encouraging those who returned from Babylonian captivity to finish rebuilding the temple. His ministry also involved renewing the hope of people in a future restoration of Israel under Messiah's reign (Zechariah 1:1).

The name Zechariah means "God remembers." God is remembering His people in this book and still working with the nation Israel. Zechariah challenged the returning captives to not live as their fathers. God's anger and resulting captivity with the preceding generation was a warning to them about following the same path. The pre-captivity prophets pleaded with the people to repent and turn from their sinful ways. But the people refused to obey (Zechariah 7:7). Therefore, God wants the returning captives to know if they fail to obey they will face the same results.

Coming home to Palestine and rebuilding the temple would mean nothing unless the heart of the people was right with God. That is the issue Zechariah deals with in Zechariah 7. Religious observances and spiritual events had turned into lifeless ritual for the people and the nation. The people needed to listen to the word of God as spoken to them by the prophets rather than just going through their meaningless rituals.

**God's Requirements (Zechariah 7:8-10)**

The “*word of the LORD*” came to Zechariah “*in the fourth year of King Darius*” (Zechariah 7:1). That means the events of Zechariah 7 take place about two years after the night visions of Zechariah in chapters 1 through 6. Work on the temple is probably about half complete at this time. Things seem to be going well for the people.

A few months prior to the word of the Lord coming to Zechariah in Zechariah 7:1, the people had observed a “*fast*” to remember the destruction of the city of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar at the beginning of the exile (Zechariah 7:4-5). Now, they are back in the land, the exile is over and the temple is being rebuilt. There is a debate among the people as to whether they should continue to observe this “*fast*” now since they are home and things are going well. Two men, “*Sherezer and Regemmelech*” (Zechariah 7:2) are sent to the priests and to the prophets to help settle this issue. They ask, “*Should I weep in the fifth month, separating myself, as I have done these so many years*” (Zechariah 7:3). They are looking for a simple “*Yes*” or “*No*” answer. Do we “*fast*” or not?

God’s answer through Zechariah in Zechariah 7:4-7 was, “*When ye fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh month, even those seventy years, did ye at all fast unto me, even to me?*” (Zechariah 7:5). The religious “*fast*” the people had been keeping all those years was nothing more than empty religious performance. Now that the people are wanting to stop fasting all together is indicative of a deeper spiritual problem. The people were not only outwardly religious but they also suffered from an inward moral indifference.

The people did not get a simple “*Yes*” or “*No*” answer. Their hearts were laid bare by Zechariah as he declared “*the word of the LORD.*”

*Note: It is so easy to keep up the appearance of being right with God through our outward religious observances. Our prayers, singing, offerings, and attendance to special religious and traditional observances can blind us to the reality of our hearts.*

### Verse 8-10

“*And the word of the LORD came unto Zechariah, saying, Thus speaketh the LORD of hosts, saying, Execute true judgment, and shew mercy and compassions every man to his brother: And oppress not the widow, nor the fatherless, the stranger, nor the poor; and let none of you imagine evil against his brother in your heart.*”

“*And the word of the LORD came unto Zechariah...*” are significant words. Once again Zechariah in “*words*” given to him by the direct inspiration of God challenges the people to be right in their dealings with their fellow man. “*Thus speaking the LORD of hosts*” reveals the message Zechariah is delivering is a

message of power and authority. The “Lord of armies” has sent this message. The heart of the message involves four important injunctions as a practical test of spiritual reality.

First, “Execute true judgment” is literally, “judge,” or “make a judicial decision based on impartiality and characterized by truth.” God wants His people to render a true decision in contrast to a false one. Observing a special “fast” that was instituted by the people is nothing compared to dealing honestly and truthfully in matters of life.

Second, “Shew mercy and compassions every man to his brother.” “Shew” means “to do” or “work.” “Mercy” is “kindness” or “graciousness.” “Compassions” carries the idea of showing tenderness and cherishing. It is a word that characterizes the feelings shared by those born from the same womb. God’s people should practice kindness and cherish the relationship we have in Christ. That is true Christianity.

Third, “And oppress not the widow, nor the fatherless, the stranger, nor the poor...” The “widow, fatherless, and stranger” represent helpless members of society. God does not want these helpless people taken advantage of in their situations. Those who do so plainly reveal there is something lacking in their heart (James 1:27).

The word “oppress” means “to press upon, defraud, violate, or do wrong.” It is hypocrisy and sin to attend church, participate in religious ritual, and “oppress” the helpless.

Fourth, “And let none of you imagine evil against his brother in your heart.” This fourth injunction goes deeper than the first three in that it reveals the sin that lies at the basis of all of them. Everything that causes man to do what he does on the outside comes from what is going on in the “heart.” “Imagine” means “devise, fabricate, or weave.” A man who is right with the Lord does not plan or make up evil against his brother. Jesus said, “*For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders*” (Mark 7:21).

### **Israel’s Refusal (Zechariah 7:11-12a)**

#### Verse 11

“But they refused to hearken, and pulled away the shoulder, and stopped their ears, that they should not hear.”

“But they refused to hearken, and pulled away the shoulder, and stopped their ears, that they should not hear” are sharp words from the prophet depicting the rejection of the Word of God by the returned captives. “Refused” is a word

indicating an utter refusal. The people never considered listening to the prophet. “Pulled away the shoulder” is taken from the conduct of an ox or heifer refusing the yoke (Hosea 4:16; Nehemiah 9:29). The idea is that Israel is like an animal refusing to be yoked up to plow and continually rebelling against any imposed authority. The pre-captivity people refused to give heed to God’s Word, pulling away from its control and authority of their lives.

“Stopped their ears, that they should not hear” means they deliberately refused to obey God’s Word. In spite of God’s clear commands and promises of blessings for obedience, the people refused to listen. “That they should not hear” means they put themselves in a position spiritually where they could not hear. Hypocrisy, disobedience, apathy, indifference, and a host of other sins causes man to become calloused to hearing God’s Word. Although the “stopping their ears” and placing themselves in a condition where “they should not hear” was their responsibility, at some point it became the judicial judgment of God upon them. If man does not want to hear the word of God, God will eventually put man in a position where he cannot hear the word of God.

#### Verse 12a

“Yea, they made their hearts as an adamant stone, lest they should hear the law, and the words which the LORD of hosts hath sent in his spirit by the former prophets...”

The “hearts” of the people had become like “an adamant stone.” The comparison used here speaks of a heart that was impenetrably hard. An “adamant stone” speaks of a substance so hard it would cut rocks. Before the Jewish people were carried into Babylonia captivity they had made their hearts so hard that nothing, not even God’s Word could make an impression upon them.

“Hearts” is a reference to “the inner man” or “soul of man.” It includes that part in all of us that controls our minds and wills. “They made” means their hearts had not become hard by accident, but rather of set purpose. Their aim was not to “hear the law, and the words which the LORD of hosts hath sent in his spirit by the former prophets.” The prophets had been sent by God and prophesied in the power of the Holy Spirit, but the people’s hearts were so hard they could not hear.

They refused to hear the “law,” a reference to the words of Moses as lawgiver and the prophets who consistently called the people back to obedience to God’s law. In spite of all their refusal and intentionally rejecting the prophets and their messages, they continued going to the temple, observing holy days, and living as if all was well between themselves and the Lord.

## **God's Response (Zechariah 12b-14)**

### Verse 12b-14

"...therefore came a great wrath from the LORD of hosts." Therefore it is come to pass, that as he cried, and they would not hear; so they cried, and I would not hear, saith the LORD of hosts: But I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations whom they knew not. Thus the land was desolate after them, that no man passed through nor returned: for they laid the pleasant land desolate."

In response to their injustices and indifference to God's Word, God sent "a great wrath" upon them. Zechariah returns to his stern note of warning of God's wrath which he included in his introductory sermon in Zechariah 1:1-6. He wants the post-captivity people now in Palestine to remember what happens when you go through the outward rituals but the inner man is not right with God.

"Therefore it is come to pass, that as he cried, and they would not hear; so they cried, and I would not hear, saith the LORD of hosts..." The evidence of failure to hear and heed God's words and disobedience is always powerlessness in prayer. God cried out to them through the prophets and "they would not hear." When "they cried," God said, "I would not hear."

Besides the ineffectiveness in prayer, the people were to be "scattered with a whirlwind among all the nations whom they knew not." "Scattered" means "to storm, to rage." God is saying, "I will whirl them away by a storm-like wind." The words denotes a violent scattering.

Israel was judged by nations who were complete strangers to them (Jeremiah 16:13). That made the captivity and their punishment much more unbearable. Their homeland was "desolate" or "empty" after they were gone. No one traveled the roads and the fields lay unproductive. "No man passed through nor returned" is a sobering contrast to a city accustomed to the heavy trafficking of people going and coming on a continual basis. "They," the disobedient fathers of the returning captives had caused their homeland to lose all marks of her identity and purpose. "They" made the land "desolate." "Desolate" accurately describes what sin and disobedience causes. The word means "ruin" and "waste." The land of Canaan in its beauty and prosperity is a land of pleasure and delight (Psalm 106: 24; Jeremiah 3:19).

## **Conclusion**

The Lord wanted the returning remnant to understand that ritual and religious activity was not a substitute for real spiritual life. Their special days of fasting had become nothing more than formality. God wanted them to hear His Word

and obey it. When you hear and heed the word of God there will be joy and peace.

What about us? Our apathy and lack of reality in our worship and service must try God's patience. Are you real in your worship? Is your praying, coming to church, singing, giving, and praying from your heart? If it is, you will have a proper heart attitude toward truth and those around you in need.

God's message through Zechariah is simple. You cannot worship the Lord with bitterness or some grudge in your heart. God does not want your religion or ritual. He wants your heart!

Amen.