

Introduction

It seems that hardly a week passes that you don't read about a local church or an entire denomination announcing changes that you know would never have been acceptable just a few years ago. Their decision appears to occur very suddenly only because we're reading about it for the first time; in reality, it's been coming for a long, long time. Essentially it's the long-term result of no longer listening to God's Word and thus having become resistant to allowing it to change their heart, to rule their life. This process results in what was once called "worship" becoming just plain old "religion". And once "religion" sets in, people don't want to operate according to God's Word and rules but their own. They become obedient to rituals and schedules and notions that are not biblically based, but flesh-based. They lack true, biblical obedience.

Read verses 1-3

¹In the fourth year of King Darius, the word of the LORD came to Zechariah on the fourth day of the ninth month, which is Chislev. ²Now the town of Bethel had sent Sharezer and Regemmelech and their men to seek the favor of the LORD, ³speaking to the priests who belong to the house of the LORD of hosts, and to the prophets, saying, "Shall I weep in the fifth month and abstain, as I have done these many years?"

Information: "Sharezer" is an Assyrian name that means "Prefect of the Treasury" and "Regemmelech" means "king's official". Their names seem to imply that they may not at all be Jewish or perhaps only part Jewish, brought in to inter-marry with those who remained in the land. They are probably officials designated by the kings that conquered Israel to maintain the religious practices of the land in order to "appease the gods of the land". In other words, they appear to be someone with professional rank and duties, not true followers of the God of Israel. They practice "religion", not "faith".

Q: What has been significant about the town of Bethel in the past?

A: It was the center of false worship set up by the then-divided Northern Kingdom of Israel as their own substitute for the Temple and priesthood in Jerusalem.

Q: This request is submitted in the NINTH month for something not to happen for another EIGHT months. What is the event in the fifth month that they're asking about?

A: It's the date when the temple was destroyed. It's an odd question considering that the 2nd temple has now been completed.

Q: Putting all these things together—the nature of the men making the request, the history of the place they are maintaining, and the event in question—what does this request reveal about their character and intentions?

A: They're more concerned about ritual and ceremony than actual worship and devotion. It's a job to them, not a way of life.

Application: Biblical obedience cannot come from someone who treats their faith like a **job** instead of **a way of life**.

⁴Then the word of the LORD of hosts came to me, saying, ⁵“Say to all the people of the land and to the priests, ‘When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months these seventy years, was it actually for Me that you fasted? ⁶When you eat and drink, do you not eat for yourselves and do you not drink for yourselves? ⁷Are not these the words which the LORD proclaimed by the former prophets, when Jerusalem was inhabited and prosperous along with its cities around it, and the Negev and the foothills were inhabited?’”

⁸Then the word of the LORD came to Zechariah saying, ⁹“Thus has the LORD of hosts said, ‘Dispense true justice and practice kindness and compassion each to his brother; ¹⁰and do not oppress the widow or the orphan, the stranger or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.’”

¹¹But they refused to pay attention and turned a stubborn shoulder and stopped their ears from hearing. ¹²They made their hearts like flint so that they could not hear the law and the words which the LORD of hosts had sent by His Spirit through the former prophets; therefore great wrath came from the LORD of hosts.

Read verses 4-7

Q: Obviously these are rhetorical questions. What point is God making about the religious activities that were sustained in Israel during the people’s 70 years of captivity in Babylon?

A: That it was nothing more than religious activity; they were not worshipping or following God from their heart. It was nothing more to them than a holiday to pleasure themselves.

Application: Does this say anything to us about the way we treat Easter or Christmas?

Q: What is the point God is making in v.7 regarding Jerusalem?

A: His judgment on Jerusalem was supposed to serve as the quintessential example to serve Him from the heart, not the mouth. God questions whether even after witnessing what happened to Jerusalem they have learned the proper lesson.

Application: Biblical obedience cannot come from someone who **witnesses** God at work but is not personally **transformed** by it.

Read verses 8-10

Q: If the issue of whether or not they are worshipping God for the right reasons has been raised by God, why does He all of the sudden seem to change the topic to their treatment of their fellow man?

A: All the Law is summarized in 2 commandments, to love God with all your heart and to love your neighbor as yourself. **BOTH** must be present and active. The way they treat each other is further, tangible proof that they lack real love for God. They are going through the motions not just in treating Him like a religious duty, but in their treatment of each other. The biblical label for this kind of behavior is “hypocrisy”.

Application: Obedience to the **first tablet** (“loving God”) is impossible without obedience to the **second tablet** (“loving others”).

Read verses 11-12

Q: What’s the process of going from a worshipper of God to a mere practitioner of religion?

1. “...they refused to pay attention...” (v.11)
2. “...turned a stubborn shoulder...” (v.11)
3. “...stopped their ears from hearing...” (v.11)
4. “...made their hearts like flint...” (v.12)

Q: What is the net result of these behaviors?

A: “...they could not hear the law and the words which the LORD of hosts had sent by His Spirit through the former prophets...” (v.12) God

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provided the truth but they could not recognize it due to their own behavior.

Q: What comes upon those who don't listen to or adopt God's "law and the words"?

A: They ultimately experience great wrath from God.

Application: Does judgment come without warning? Have you considered the degree to which you're attentive to God's Word is an indicator of your overall walk? If **NOT** paying attention to His Word ultimately results in wrath, how should you approach His Word?

Application: The disobedient are **incapable** of understanding or applying the Word of God due to their own **behavior**.

Read verses 13-14

¹³And just as He called and they would not listen, so they called and I would not listen," says the LORD of hosts; ¹⁴but I scattered them with a storm wind among all the nations whom they have not known. Thus the land is desolated behind them so that no one went back and forth, for they made the pleasant land desolate."

Q: Place v.13 in context within the overall passage. What do we learn about how to effectively call on the name of the Lord?

A: We must embrace characteristics opposite of v.11-12: pay attention, be open to change for His sake, listen with the intention of putting His Word into actual practice, and maintaining a heart malleable by His Word. Otherwise we only call Him when we're desperate and really have no intention of listening or changing, but are just trying to get what **WE** want. God's on to that.

Application: If we do not change our own **behavior**, we will find ourselves just like the disobedient, who only call on God to get **what they want**. We should be just as obedient in times of **stress** the same as we are in times of **peace**.

Overall Application

- What things might we be treating more as a duty or ritual than an act of worship or devotion? Is this area due to our decision to eliminate His Word from the picture regarding these things?
- Are there areas or topics that we seem resistant to discussing in the light of God's Word? What might this indicate? What should we do?
- What do you think God's assessment would be to date of **OUR** attitude and approach to His things? Is it closer to "worship" or "religion"?

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