

Zechariah Chapters 7-8- John Karmelich

1. I'll start with some good news. We're all done with Zechariah's weird dreams. If you're new to these studies, this book to date has mostly been explaining visions God gave him. Those first six chapters describe God's plans for us (judgment and ruling the world from Israel). Ok, now what?
 - a) Obviously there has a "now what" since we're only at the half way point of the book.
 - b) The first thing to say so far about all that, is Zechariah caught up on his sleep after having all six of those strange visions in one night. This "next scene" takes place about two years later. It's a reminder that God didn't speak to the prophets "24/7". Prophets had lives to live too, as you "can't pay the bills" by just getting visions from God.
 - c) Anyway, Chapter 7 opens about two years later. Here, God spoke to Zechariah again. It's the central focus of chapters 7 and 8, which is why they're combined as one lesson.
 - d) The question of "now what" is the focus of these two chapters. Chapter 7 can be described as God's "negative reaction" to how the Israelites were acting. It's as if He's says, "Here is how your parents and grandparents acted, and to be honest that's what got them kicked out of the land of Israel in the first place."
 - e) Chapter 8 is the "positive flip side" with God saying in effect, "If you all act the way I want all of you to act, here's the benefits you'll have not only in this lifetime but eternally".
 - f) Think of Chapters 7 and 8 as God's "question and answer session" through Zechariah. It's as if He wants the Israelites (and yes, us Christians) to grasp what His plans are for the world which involves judging it and ruling over it one day. The key question is "What do we do in the meantime?" That's my lesson title and the main point of this lesson.
2. One thing I stress in these lessons is the purpose of bible study is not to learn ancient history. To learn it is often helpful as background to explain the text, but it's not the primary purpose that we are to study our bible. I read way lots of bible commentaries that focus way too much on ancient historical details and often miss the point of what God's trying to communicate: We are to learn from the mistakes made by the Israelites as to not repeat them, as well as trust the promises God made to them (and us) about our eternal future. We should learn what it is God's chosen people do right and wrong so we can "copy that" for our own lives.
 - a) OK then, that's the "big picture". Obviously, the whole bible is there to teach us how God wants us to live. That means no particular bible chapter (or two) has all the answers.
 - b) Therefore, let's focus on the specifics that God wants us realize as taught in these chapters.
 - c) Chapter 7 starts about two years after the events of Chapters 1-6. It opens with some new "background characters" from another town near Jerusalem asking Zechariah, "Should we continue to fast several times a year as we have been doing since the captivity started?"
 - i) The point of the question is the Israelites developed rituals to focus on events that led to the destruction of the old temple and the fall of Jerusalem. Since the temple is now being rebuilt, the question is, should they continue those rituals?
 - ii) God's answer goes to the bigger question: Who ordered you to perform those fasts in the first place? They're not "biblical". Those Israelites made up new rules over and above what God already required of them. God's answer is effectively "You lived like the devil but thought you're good with Me, because you did all of those non-biblical rituals". The point is we can never be right with God by performing specific rituals. What we have to do is live daily, as He desires we live. That's the type of lifestyle God wants. That's the "now what" for our lives.
 - iii) I could get into specifics, but I suspect most of you know them by now: It requires showing kindness to others. It's about putting other's needs as a priority over our own needs. It's about loving God as much as we can and then loving others as much as we can. Of course we're only saved by God's grace, but the focus here is the question of, "What have we done with it?" That's Chapter 7 in a nutshell.

3. As I stated, both Chapters 7 and 8 are effectively a "Q&A" session between God and the Israelites about how His people are supposed to live. Chapter 7 focuses on how the Israelites have messed up in the past, Chapter 8 focuses on "here's how God's going to bless you in the future". None of this means that the Israelites (or us Christians for that matter) acted as God desired them to act. I consider the bible as a manual on how God wants us to live. Of course the bible goes into details to explain why we're sinners, how we are forgiven and what God's done for us. But much of it is a manual on "now what": Once we realize we can't earn our salvation because He's already paid the price for us, the big question is "now what"? The "now what" is about living as He desires we live. All of that means is the main purpose for living is to glorify God by our lives. We study His world so we can learn the "now what" for our lives, which is to understand how God wants us to live once we realize all of that is true.
 - a) Anyway, Chapter 7 focuses on what the Israelites were doing wrong.
 - b) Chapter 8 focuses on how God's people will be blessed if (big if) they (and we) choose to live as He desires. A key underlying point of Chapter 8 is "this will happen, accept it as it will be the future"! Then we must chose whether we want it to be our future as well or, let's be honest, suffer hell as a rejection of that choice. There is no third option. It's either we live as God desires or we reject Him. It's either be a part of this eternal joyful life with us living for Him now or just try to get all we can out of life now and suffer eternally.
 - c) I'm sorry to come down so hard here, but essentially that's what God's doing here.
4. OK then time for some Chapter 8 details, and then I can start the main portion of the lesson.
 - a) To begin, remember that prophecy is "patterns". That just means most bible predictions have a short-term and a long-term fulfillment. The famous example is while the Israelites were in captivity, Ezekiel predicted they'd return to that land again. That prediction came true once when the Persians let them go home. That's the same time period we have here in Zechariah. The double-fulfillment came in 1948 when Israel became the only nation in world history to ever to be conquered and "resurrected" as an independent country.
 - b) That's important to grasp here, because Zechariah talks about joyful events. I'm guessing that there was some short term fulfillment as Israel became a thriving land again even as a part of the Persian Empire. It's also "end time", as once Jesus finishes judging everyone as described in the last two chapters, it's "party time". The text talks about bringing Israelites to that land from around the world as well as non-Jewish people to worship God. The text even mentions people from other countries desiring to go to Israel as let's face it, that place will become the most important place in the world when Jesus literally rules there.
5. OK John, hold the happiness music for a moment. How do we know Zechariah didn't write all of this just to give the Israelites back then hope? Let's face it, it's been 2,000 years since Jesus roamed the earth. So how do we know all of this will happen in the future? Well for starters, Israel's back in that land after not being an independent country for over 2,500 years. That's a clue. Another big clue is the Old Testament predicted accurately every aspect of Jesus First Coming. To me that means we can trust the predictions about the Second Coming, which have been a big them of this book. With that said, time for "Q&A" with God through Zechariah. Let's start on the details.
6. Chapter 7, Verse 1: In the fourth year of King Darius, the word of the LORD came to Zechariah on the fourth day of the ninth month, the month of Kislev. ² The people of Bethel had sent Sharezer and Regem-Melech, together with their men, to entreat the LORD ³ by asking the priests of the house of the LORD Almighty and the prophets, "Should I mourn and fast in the fifth month, as I have done for so many years?"
 - a) I need to begin with a quick "when" lecture. The short version is December of 518BC. The longer version is it's been about two years since the six visions in one night that made up the last six chapters. The text also makes a subtle point that the Israelites are still part of a foreign empire. The date given here is based on the current emperor of the Medo-Persian Empire. The reason the dating is so precise is because Zechariah wanted to point out that it's now been two years into the temple construction project and God spoke to him then.

- b) As I said in the introduction, the Old Testament prophets didn't get daily or hourly "God bulletins". I'm sure they prayed and studied their bibles to date. My point is God is only speaking to prophets when He's ready to, and when He wants to say something that He wants the prophets to write down. Now that we've established "God's got something to say here", let's see what it is.
 - c) The scene includes a few new characters: We can assume their also Israelites who moved back there. Their names are "Babylonian", but we can also assume they're Jewish, as they are interested in Jewish rituals. The text says they're from Bethel, which is located about 12 miles north of Jerusalem if memory is correct. OK enough of the trivia, the point is that these men asked the top priests in Jerusalem, should we continue the fast rituals that were started while the Israelites were in captivity. The specific point is the Israelites held a fast to recall the specific dates that Jerusalem "died" as a city (destroyed by the Babylonians) as well as the date the last temple was destroyed. The question is in effect, "Hey, since we're back in the land and since we're rebuilding this temple, what about our annual "bad day" rituals? Do we keep it up or knock it off? That's the effective question here.
 - d) Since Zechariah "made his living" as a priest, apparently he heard this message. I doubt he prayed specifically for an answer to that question. I'm guessing that this was the moment God did decide to interrupt his life and say, "Hey Zech how about taking some dictation again as I (God) am about to communicate to all if Israel again through you"! I'm guessing that Zechariah was as shocked as anyone that God was speaking to Him again, and with those six visions now fresh in his mind, I'm sure he was wondering what God's got in store for him to say and write down now.
 - e) Before I move on, this is a good spot to talk about fasting. The Old Testament only had one fasting requirement per year. It's a "fall holiday" where to this day, religious Jewish people don't eat all day to focus on their sins individually and collectively. I have friends who are Orthodox Jewish and they will fast a few other days of the year as to remember certain events in Israel's history. My point is "non-biblical ritual" is alive and well today.
 - i) The more important question is why and when should Christians fast? I've viewed fasts as a way of showing God one is serious about a commitment to prayer. I also believe we can't force God to act just because we fast. Giving up food or a specific type of food for a time period is simply a way to say, "I'm so committed to getting an answer to my question to God, I'm willing to go without food for awhile." Yes, I will argue fasting for Christians is "biblical", but it should also be done quietly as to not let others know what you are doing. I recall a day or two after "9-11" a fast was requested by the President of the United States to show God we as a nation are serious about drawing close to Him and asking His protection against future attacks. In summary, we can't "prove our worth" to God by a fast, but it is a way of showing God we're serious about a commitment to draw close to Him by giving up food or specific foods for some specific time period.
 - ii) OK, enough of that, time to get back to Zechariah.
7. Verse 4: Then the word of the LORD Almighty came to me: ⁵ "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? ⁶ And when you were eating and drinking, were you not just feasting for yourselves? ⁷ Are these not the words the LORD proclaimed through the earlier prophets when Jerusalem and its surrounding towns were at rest and prosperous, and the Negev and the western foothills were settled?' "
- a) Let me paraphrase Zechariah's answer: The 70 years that the Israelites lived in captivity: Did they really care about Me, or did they just do a few fasting rituals in order to relieve a guilty conscious about seeking Me (God)? Zechariah then effectively goes on to say, didn't other prophets speak to Israelites when it wasn't under attack and growing in prosperity to say that unless they make God the center of their lives, they're in big trouble?

- i) The point is Israel "went down for the count" for failing to live a God centered life.
 - ii) Now that the Israelites are back in the land, many of them wanted to continue to perform a bunch of rituals in order to relieve their guilt for not seeking God.
 - b) Let me explain this with a true story that happened to me many years ago. I went to eat at a local restaurant. I was holding the table waiting for the rest of my family to join me. As I was waiting, across from me were two young men talking loudly. I couldn't help but notice how much they swore and invoked Jesus' name as they swore. I'll just say they were giving evidence they're not living as God desired. What then caught my attention was that one of them said "no alcohol today, I gave it up for lent". He thought that ritual was pleasing to God. (If you don't know, it's a religious Roman Catholic ritual.)
 - i) My point isn't to say determine whether they were saved or not. My point is that God's never been impressed with "extra-biblical" rituals in order to earn His favor while "living like the devil" outside of those rituals. What God cares about is what is our daily attitude toward Him and others. It's about showing kindness. I sum it up as loving God as hard as we can and putting other's needs as priority over our own. That's a rough translation of what Jesus said is the two most important laws in the bible. We're always a witness for Jesus based on our actions. If we live like we don't care about God "363 days a year" and then spend "two days a year" doing some sort of ritual, God's not impressed. Again, we can't earn His favor by doing any specific ritual for any specific time period. God wants us to live as He desires on a daily basis. Again, not to earn His love, but out of gratitude for what He has done for us. Now that we all feel guilty over our rituals, back to Zechariah.
8. Verse 8: And the word of the LORD came again to Zechariah: ⁹ "This is what the LORD Almighty says: `Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. ¹⁰ Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor. In your hearts do not think evil of each other.'
- a) If you think I was out in "left field" about what God cares about, I present these 3 verses.
 - b) The underlying point is God's not impressed with rituals, but with how we live our daily lives. What if you say, "Yes, but this is Old Testament, what about the New? The "New" has the same attitude about our witness for God. One of the main points that the writers of the New Testament "pound home" is we can't earn our salvation by rituals nor can any of us be "more pleasing to God" by performing specific rituals. God expects us to live like He desires out of gratitude for what He's done for us. I want to live like He desires as that is the way to have a joy filled life. Living as God desires we live will bring us far more joy in this life than by any and all our choices we can make that avoid living as He desires.
 - c) With that said, onto the specific's here: What God desires is "true justice". That's about us doing what's right in life. Showing mercy and compassion is what Jesus taught. Helping the less fortunate in life is showing compassion. The essential idea is to put other's needs as a priority over our own. Seeing others as "needing Jesus" is always better than to wish for "evil" upon others. Grant it there are always exceptions. If someone wants to harm us in some physical way, we need to get away for our own safety. I'm not talking about those types of critical situations. I'm simply saying our attitude as we go through life should be about putting other's needs as priority over our own. That's essentially Zechariah's point here. Jesus said that God's two most important commandments in effect are to love God as much as possible and love our neighbors as much as ourselves. (Matthew 22:36-40.) When we live life by "passing it forward" and caring for the needs of others, it not only brings joy to our lives, but it pleases God far more than any and all non-biblical rituals we could ever perform.
 - d) The important point to get across here is we can live a life pleasing to God. Not so we can earn His love, but it's about living as He desires we live. The secret is not to perform any specific ritual, but to live as God desires we live, which is about caring about Him as well as caring about others around us. That's how we make God pleased with our lives.

- e) Let me throw one more Christian "theological" question at you: If we can't earn salvation, why bother living as God desires? What's the purpose of living that way? For starters it'll bring us far more joy to our lives than if we just live to do everything we can for ourselves in this life. Yes the bible also speaks of heavenly rewards, but I've always thought of that as a secondary motivation. I want to be pleasing to God, simply because I want to as that is the best way to live life. I want a joy filled life. It doesn't mean life will always go well. It means if we live as God desires, an internal sense of joy will fill us no matter what we're dealing with at any given time. That to me, is the greatest purpose for living!
 - f) OK, that's the good news. Time for the bad news:
9. Verse 11: "But they refused to pay attention; stubbornly they turned their backs and stopped up their ears. ¹² They made their hearts as hard as flint and would not listen to the law or to the words that the LORD Almighty had sent by his Spirit through the earlier prophets. So the LORD Almighty was very angry.
- a) Zechariah is focusing on the previous generation of Israelites that were sent into captivity. The key point is God told the same principals to "them" as they did to us. However, they refused to listen. The idea of "hearts as hard as flint" is the idea that one can be so set in their ways that even the word of God won't sink in no matter how much it's preached!
 - b) Let me talk a little about rejection of God's word. Why do so many believe the bible is the word of God, but refuse to read it or trust in it? The answer is we get so busy with life we tend to put God on the "back burner" as opposing to getting Him involved. Sometimes I think that angels watch us and think, "Why do they do all of that to themselves? Don't they realize they could pray here and God's more than willing to interceded and help out? Why do people go on with their lives as if He doesn't exist?"
 - c) So why did God send the Israelites into captivity? Yes we know the technical reasons that they ignored Him, but what's the lesson to us? That God's willing to do what He can as to get our attention. If ignoring Him is what we want, then God will give us over to what it is we want. If we want to ignore Him, I think God effectively says, "OK then, I have much better plans for your life, but if you don't want Me as the center of it, I'll turn you over to your desires." I've always been fond of the idea that "Hell will be locked from the inside." It's the idea that people go there who don't want God as the center of their lives. They end their lives getting what they want, eternity away from His presence. The point is whether we realize it or not, God's rules are there for our joy. When we choose to ignore living as God desires we live, we suffer not only in this lifetime (that's what "captivity" represents) but we'll also suffer eternally.
 - d) The underlying point of this whole lesson is that God wants us to live by His standards. If we try to add rituals (like the fasting ones) to His rules, God says to us, "Hey, I didn't ask you to do this or that ritual. I expect you to live daily as I desire. That alone is how to be pleasing to Me." What if we've messed up our lives to date? We can't change the past. All we can do is learn from it and live as God desires. That's what these verses teach us. That to live as God desires is not about rituals, but about using our lives to make a difference in the world around us by putting other's needs as priority over our own.
 - e) OK then, now that I've beaten that point to death, we can move on.
10. Verse 13: " 'When I called, they did not listen; so when they called, I would not listen,' says the LORD Almighty. ¹⁴ 'I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations, where they were strangers. The land was left so desolate behind them that no one could come or go. This is how they made the pleasant land desolate.' "
- a) While I was done making my point, Zechariah goes on to describe some more how He did try to get the Israelites to listen to Him. When they failed, they got scattered all over that large Babylonian empire and the land of Israel was left desolate. Realize what God desires more than anything else is to go gather together those He loves around Him so He can be close to all of us. Let me expand upon that with something Jesus said:

- b) One of the most interesting things Jesus ever said about all those who potentially could be His followers: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing." (Matthew 23:37). The point of this quote is we read of God's "willingness" to gather His people together. The point as it relates to these two verses is we read that God scattered the Israelites due to their unwillingness to be gathered together as believers and trust in Him.
 - c) I don't know about you, but that alone is a good reason to be obedient to Jesus. I wouldn't want to be "scattered" from those I love either in this life or in the one to come.
 - d) The good news is we're done with the bad news. Chapter 8 is still a "Q&A" type of session but it switches from the consequences, to the blessings of trusting in God. Let's begin.
11. Chapter 8, Verse 1: Again the word of the LORD Almighty came to me. ² This is what the LORD Almighty says: "I am very jealous for Zion; I am burning with jealousy for her."
- a) Let's begin with another "time stamp". Apparently God spoke "Chapter 8" to Zechariah at the same time as Chapter 7. To state what should be obvious, they go together, as they're both part of this same effective question and answer session.
 - b) While Verse 1 doesn't sound very positive, it is. When God says He's "very jealous" for the Israelites, it means He wants to gather His people together.
 - c) So can a perfect God get jealous? The way I was taught about God and emotions, is He is always "perfectly angry at sin", always, "perfectly loving to us" and yes God is jealous to protect what is His. It's jealousy in the sense He wants to protect what belongs to Him.
 - i) This leads to the classical debate, "Can one lose their salvation?" Many Christians love to debate this. My favorite answer is, "You may lose yours, but I trust in Jesus to pay the complete price for my sins and if I was capable of losing it, I could!"
 - d) So what is God specifically jealous about? The way I view it is if and when we're called to be His witness to the world, He can't stand it when we turn from Him. If we are wasting a lot of our time seeking after things other than God, we can tell if we has a heart for Him simply because we feel guilty we're not living as we're supposed to. I can't explain how a perfect God feels jealous, I just know the Holy Spirit convicts us when we turn from Him. That's how we know God has a "burning jealousy" for those He's called to be His people.
 - e) Does that mean everyone who's called is saved? Hardly. I believe God desires all people turn to Him. The way I view life is God has perfect information and we don't. The only way we can know if we're saved is if we have given our lives to Him. Since God knows all things, He knows who has and who hasn't as He has perfect knowledge by definition. It also means God knows in advance (but we don't) who will be saved and who won't.
 - f) OK, enough theology for one verse. Let's try the next one:
12. Verse 2: This is what the LORD says: "I will return to Zion and dwell in Jerusalem. Then Jerusalem will be called the City of Truth, and the mountain of the LORD Almighty will be called the Holy Mountain."
- a) Speaking of theology, how can God "return" somewhere? Obviously, this is greater than the standard "God is everywhere" answer. Remember that we are reading prophecy here. If the LORD returns to dwells in Jerusalem, He must also be man, so He can dwell in a specific place at one time.
 - b) As I love to state, prophecy is "patterns". That means there is a short-term fulfillment to prove that the speaker is "God ordained" and another long-term fulfillment that is often the main intent of what God wants to communicate.
 - c) Let me put it this way. The short-term fulfillment happened in Zechariah's time, as Israel was gathered in the land again. Even at that point in history, no nation has been scattered and came back together as a nation. Yes they came back as part of another empire, but the point is they were back. Israel also holds the distinction as the only nation to pull that off twice in history. My point being that there was a short and long-term fulfillment here.

- d) Now that I've beaten that point to death, let's talk about the long-term fulfillment. Let's be honest as of today, Jerusalem is not known as the "city of truth" or "mountain of the Lord". It is visited by millions of Christians and those of Jewish backgrounds every year as being a historical site, but it's not literally where God is "sitting". Yes multitudes pray there but I suspect Zechariah is being much more literal here. As I said, it's describing some future day when Jesus Himself will literally rule from that place.
 - e) OK John, how do we know that's true? Maybe it's just about the Israelites returning to the land at that time and "that's that". If that's true, it wouldn't be much of a prediction as that already occurred. Even if you just think it's about the Christians and Jewish world who do think of Jerusalem as "God's city", it doesn't fit. It says in effect "when" the LORD returns there, it'll be called all those things. I've learned over the years to take the bible "seriously" and that's the best interpretation of these verses.
 - f) One final thing to consider about these verses. Remember that Zechariah was asked about whether or not the Israelites should continue to fast now that they're "home" again. God's saying in effect, stop focusing on the past. Instead realize that His timing is His timing. I am saying God's still going to go through with His plan to rule the world from Jerusalem. All their fasting and praying won't speed up or change that plan. God always works on His timing and the world's still moving along according to His plan. The challenge of life is to control what we can control, let go of what we can't, and having the wisdom to know the difference.
 - g) With that said, I interrupted Zechariah when he was on a role:
13. Verse 4: This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Once again men and women of ripe old age will sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with cane in hand because of his age. ⁵ The city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there."
- a) I said Chapter 8 will be a lot more upbeat and I meant it. So why would Zechariah say the city of Jerusalem will be filled with people of old age and children will play in the streets.
 - b) For starters, remember the Israelites living there had "fresh in their minds" about all their parents and grandparents being taken out of that city, (or killed) as Jerusalem was empty for seventy years. Therefore, these verses have a "short-term" comfort fulfillment given a plan to worship God as He desires and rebuild the temple, the good news, they won't be dragged away once again.
 - c) The long-term fulfillment obviously ties to the Second Coming. If you read my last lesson, it focused on God's judgment of believers, nonbelievers and demonic forces all as separate groups. If Verse 4 is "millennial", then God's saying, "Those who trust in Me will be living where fear of an enemy attack will not be an issue".
 - d) These verses pose another question: Will people still "grow old" after God's judgment? It is a matter of keeping a few facts in mind. All of the "horror" of Revelation may not be the end of the human race in terms of the world still being populated. Many scholars argue that some "regular people" survive through all of that horror then. Our world will still have people who re-populate the world, but it'll be a world with Jesus ruling over all of it from Jerusalem. It'll be a "war-less" world where the entire world will be required to live by God's rules. The last nine chapters of Ezekiel discuss life at that time. All I'm saying is life will still go on during that 1,000 year period called the millennium, even as Jesus rules the world then. Later in Zechariah, we'll get more details about that future. For now, my simple point is life will go on with people of all ages even after Jesus returns to rule the world as the Messiah. That's the future, so accept it and deal with it!
14. Verse 6: This is what the LORD Almighty says: "It may seem marvelous to the remnant of this people at that time, but will it seem marvelous to me?" declares the LORD Almighty.
- a) John's loose translation: Does God know all things or not? It may seem like an impossible dream to everyone else that the world will be like that one day, but since "I'm God, what I say goes", we must accept it and live with the reminder this will occur one day.

- b) Remember why the bible is about one-third predictions: To validate it as God's word. By having a book full of predictions, most of which have already come true we are assured of its truth. By seeing Israel as the only country in world history to be scattered, reunited in it's homeland twice, it's a proof to the world that God keeps His word. By having all of us Christians as proof that an "obscure person from a small country" can become someone worshipped as God, is proof of it's reality. Yes of course I believe we Christians come to Jesus by faith, but once we come to that realization, we also see evidence that all of this is "real" by studying His word. That's what inspires me to keep at this for many years now.
 - c) With that hopefully uplifting speech, the main point here is simply that God's going to go through with His plans for mankind, so in spite of whatever suffering we may get in this lifetime, we are part of the "winning team" if we accept the truth of the Gospel message.
 - d) OK then, time for Verse 7.
15. Verse 7: This is what the LORD Almighty says: "I will save my people from the countries of the east and the west. ⁸ I will bring them back to live in Jerusalem; they will be my people, and I will be faithful and righteous to them as their God."
- a) You might recall from the last few chapters, attacks against Israel usually came from the north direction (i.e., Babylon, Assyria) even though those places are east of Israel. That is because the geography of the land makes it best to attack from that direction. To the south of Israel is Egypt. They too have attacked Israel through history. My point here is why is the text saying God will gather His people from the "west and the east" when almost all of the Israelites in that day were scattered to the "east" from all over the Babylonian Empire (which was now the Persian Empire).
 - b) To explain, keep a couple of things in mind. If one goes north or south, one eventually is at the north or south pole. My simple point is there's only so far one can go north or south before one runs out of real estate. To go "east or west" in effect means one can keep going and not stop. It's the bible's colorful way of saying God's going to gather His people from all over the world no matter where they are located. To quote one of my favorite biblical expressions: I don't take my bible literally, but I take it seriously! That means many of the verses in the bible are idioms, but the ideas behind the idioms should be taken seriously.
 - c) Coming back to these verses, as an example, realize more Jewish people alive today living in the United States than there are in Israel. Those of Jewish descent are living all over the world. The verse says that one day God will gather "His people" back in Israel again.
 - d) So does this verse refer to Israelites or Christians or both? I'd argue both. God's temple is referred to as a place of prayer for all nations. (Isaiah 56:7 and Mark 11:7). Let's put it this way: If Jerusalem will one day be the "center of the world" in that God Himself is going to set up a world-wide government with that city as it's headquarters, it makes sense that all people who consider God to be the center of our lives would gather together there as to be close to Him. A page back I quoted Matthew 23:37, where Jesus said He desires to gather His people together to worship Him. What God wants, God gets! That is why we read of this gathering here in these verses.
 - e) The last part of Verse 8 essentially says, "If we agree to do our part, God promises that He will do His part". That means if we are willing to live with God as the center of our lives now, He promises to be faithful to us and do what is right in terms of protecting us when we live forever in His presence. Again, one has to read chapters like this as having both short-term and long-term fulfillments. The "short term" is many Israelites did eventually return to live in Israel again from the "Persian era" up to the Roman era. Even after Rome did destroy Jerusalem in 70AD, there were still some Jewish people who lived in that area and that's been true since that time period. However, as I love to point out, Israel was not an independent country again until 1948. So what does that mean for the future? I never predict God's timing. I'm just saying the world is still moving on His timing, period!

16. Verse 9: This is what the LORD Almighty says: "You who now hear these words spoken by the prophets who were there when the foundation was laid for the house of the LORD Almighty, let your hands be strong so that the temple may be built. ¹⁰ Before that time there were no wages for man or beast. No one could go about his business safely because of his enemy, for I had turned every man against his neighbor. ¹¹ But now I will not deal with the remnant of this people as I did in the past," declares the LORD Almighty.
- a) All of this "grandiose" vision of an eternal future is nice, but how does it affect what we're dealing with now? That's what Zechariah deals with in these verses. He reminds all those listening to him in effect, "Hey everybody, now that we know about the future, what do you say we get back to the business at hand and finish this temple? Remember what was Zechariah's mission to begin with, to encourage the Israelites living there to build God's temple. As of this chapter, the temple was under construction, but not done yet.
 - b) Zechariah is reminding them, that before they came back to that land, the Israelites had to deal with enemies all around them. Now that they're back in the land, they are free to do God's work. In the history of Israel God's always said in effect, "Here is your situation, go be a witness for Me and do what you're called to do." For example when they first got to Israel, they had to conquer nations as God effectively said to those other nations, "You're on My land and whether you realize it or not you're trespassing." After they settled there, God's saying to them, "keep my temple going as a symbol to the world around you". As long as you are living as a witness for Me, I promise to protect and guide you.
 - c) What I'm getting at of course, is how different is that for us today? God never promises a pain free life. The Israelites never got that and we Christians don't get that either. Instead what we are promised is that if we trust Jesus not only as being God and dying for all our sins and as the one in charge of our lives, we will live forever in His presence. We will be a part of that group that gets to get close to Him when He rules the world from Israel. All I'm saying is this is God's plan. It's not going to change so we might as well accept it. It is a matter of asking, do we want to be a part of the winning team, great, than use our life as a witness for Him and live as He desires then we will live forever in His presence.
 - d) With another "grandiose speech" out of my system, notice Verse 11 says God will not deal with the remnant of His people as He did in the past. Stop and think about history. The Israelites were kicked out of the land again by Rome. In more recent times, we can look at the Holocaust that Germany did. My question is how can the bible say, God will not deal with His people as He did when He allowed them to be kicked out of that land? We must see this section of Zechariah as "millennial". God's not saying His people won't continue to suffer in human history. God's saying that when "all this begins", it's going to make up for all the suffering they've gone through throughout history.
 - e) So are you saying all Jewish people are saved? Of course not. Just as all of us who say we are Christians are not saved. God's going to judge us individually based on what we did know or could have known about Him. It's about what we did with the information that we had about Jesus. As I'm fond of saying, the bad news of knowing one's bible is God is going to hold us accountable for what we know about Him. All I'm saying is God is going to judge each of us fairly. However, that is His business. My business and hopefully your business is to use our lives to make a difference for Him. That's why we're here and that's why God brought Israelites back to that land back in Zechariah's day. Speaking of which:
17. Verse 12: "The seed will grow well, the vine will yield its fruit, the ground will produce its crops, and the heavens will drop their dew. I will give all these things as an inheritance to the remnant of this people. ¹³ As you have been an object of cursing among the nations, O Judah and Israel, so will I save you, and you will be a blessing. Do not be afraid, but let your hands be strong."
- a) One of the strange things I've always been fascinated by is the idea of "eternal eating". Is there going to be an "eternal" digestive system? Will heaven have bathrooms? There are many bible verses that describe food in this "millennial" age and we have some here.

- b) What I've come to accept is the idea is the world's still going to be populated during the 1,000 period of time we call the millennium. It's after all of that where God completely is going to wrap up life as we know it and draw close to us for eternity. Anyway during that 1,000-year time period, we will still eat. I don't know if digestion will work then as it does today, but I accept the idea that food and drink will still be a part of human existence.
 - c) If you think this is just Zechariah talking, realize that Revelation 22 (the last bible chapter) speaks of fruit trees existing in that millennial age. All I'm saying is that food will still be a part of human culture even after Jesus returns to "set up shop" as I'm fond of saying.
 - d) All of that theology leads us back to Zechariah's time. God's saying through him that since He's got this wonderful eternal future planned for them (and us) to live forever with Him, let's "get busy" with what God's called us to do in the meantime.
 - e) Verse 13 reminds us that Judah and Israel (the Northern and Southern Kingdom's names) were cursed in the past as both were destroyed. In the future, Israel will be a blessing to the world one day. This is another "God's going to win in the end, we might as well be a part of the winning team, as that's how the world works, so accept it!"
 - f) The idea of these verses is in essence, since God's going to win in the end, let's get busy to do what God's called us to do. For those Israelites living at that time, that meant go finish the temple so Israel can be a witness to the world around it as the center of where the God who made everything calls "home". (By the way, it's always amazed me that the God who made everything in the universe considers that little piece of real estate to be His!)
 - g) The more important question of course is what does all this mean to us? If we too accept God's eternal plan for mankind as "the" truth? What are we doing about it? What does He want us to do until then? The easy answer is use our lives to make a difference for Him. The hard answer is the "what". It's different for every believer. A great prayer is for each of us to ask Him, "OK God my time is Your time. My life is Yours. What specific thing do You want from me today? No God won't smack us on the head and say "go move here". The answer usually involves doing what is logical. Sometimes God plants ideas with us that do involve going somewhere. I figure that God hasn't lost any of our phone numbers. If we say our lives are His to do with as He pleases, He'll make it obvious to us what it is that He desires of us and when. What we have to do is do what's logical assuming that no biblical laws are violated. (For example, it's not God's will for us to steal something.) All I'm saying is that if we're willing to submit our lives to Him, He'll make it obvious in time what it is He desires of us to make that difference.
 - h) I have to admit, I'm really getting "grandiose" in this lesson. Realize Verse 13 ends with a plea to be strong in doing what God desires we do. He never promises life will be easy. What He does promise is that He'll guide us if we're willing to be guided by Him. That's what's behind the points of God encouraging the Israelites here in Zechariah.
18. Verse 14: This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Just as I had determined to bring disaster upon you and showed no pity when your fathers angered me," says the LORD Almighty, ¹⁵ "so now I have determined to do good again to Jerusalem and Judah. Do not be afraid. ¹⁶ These are the things you are to do: Speak the truth to each other, and render true and sound judgment in your courts; ¹⁷ do not plot evil against your neighbor, and do not love to swear falsely. I hate all this," declares the LORD.
- a) Remember the question asked in the last chapter about should we fast on these two dates? God's answer in effect was "That's not what I care about. What I care about is how you act every day". That's why Verse 16 lists things like speaking the truth, and being fair in how we act around each other. So does that mean salvation is based on actions? Of course not. As I preach so often, the issue isn't salvation, the issue is what we do with that salvation.
 - b) God wants us to be a good witness for Him. Obviously, those two things are not the full list. It's just obvious examples of, "if we put the interests of other people first, that means we'd want to be fair in our dealings with them and not lie to them".

- c) That leads me back to Verses 14 and 15. It essentially says that "Yes I (God) punished that last generation who lived in Israel because they ignored Me. However, I'd love to do good things in Israel if (big if) we live as a witness for Him. Back then, that meant finishing the temple. By the way, they did finish it, but that's what "Ezra and Nehemiah" deal with.
 - d) So did Israel get blessed back then? Consider the fact that Jerusalem and Israel didn't get conquered again for a few centuries until the Greeks came on the scene. However I as love to state, prophesy is "patterns". There was a "short term" validation of Zechariah here just as Israel wasn't emptied again for many centuries, his words did come true. Of course I'd say this is also "end times" as God obviously plans to bless that land as for no other reason than the fact that God Himself will rule the world one day from there.
 - e) However, that's someday in the future. In the meantime, we as Christians are called to do the same as the Israelites were back then: Be a good witness for Jesus until all that occurs.
19. Verse 18: Again the word of the LORD Almighty came to me. ¹⁹ This is what the LORD Almighty says: "The fasts of the fourth, fifth, seventh and tenth months will become joyful and glad occasions and happy festivals for Judah. Therefore love truth and peace."
- a) In Chapter 7, we read of two specific fasts that commemorated Jerusalem's fall as well as the fall of the temple. Here we get God speaking to Zechariah again, and this time it's for him to comment on the four fasts that the Israelites did. Without getting into specifics, I'll just say those other two fasts also had to do with remembering bad things that occurred.
 - b) The point is people want "rituals". They want to say, I did "x, y, and z" rituals for God so I am now free to go do what I want because I satisfied those requirements. Unfortunately, to live the Christian (or even the Jewish life for that matter) doesn't work that way. God is not impressed with our "rituals". What He wants is our daily commitment to Him. That means for example as stated a few verses back, we try to tell the truth and be honest with others. Yes there's more to it than that, but the general idea is to live as the bible teaches us to live and not add rules over and above that. Does that mean fasting or praying over a situation is wrong? Hardly. The issue is our commitment. To pray or fast over a situation shows how much we want God to act. To pray often or fast for a time, causes us to think about a situation longer and often changes our view about that situation. As I like to say, God's not obligated to answer our prayers because we fast. However, He will realize how important that situation is to us and will usually help us understand it better as we commit the situation over to Him through those actions.
 - c) My point here is rituals on an individual level are helpful to understand how He may see our situation. However, those rituals should never (big never) replace what He wants of us, a lifelong and daily commitment to make Him a part of our lives. That is why a ritual is not the key issue with God, but how we live daily for Him. We can't get out of living in a way God wants us to live by performing specific rituals. If you get that, you get a large portion of this lesson.
 - d) Finally, notice God says, "You know those four fasting days? Well I'm going to make them into feast days". No that never happened historically. What I suspect that means is when the day comes of Jesus "setting up shop", life under His rule will be "one big party" in the sense that we accept His rule over our lives and it will be full of joy. Personally, I want as much joy in my life as possible. A joy filled eternity sounds good to me.
20. This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Many peoples and the inhabitants of many cities will yet come, ²¹ 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.'²² And many peoples and powerful nations will come to Jerusalem to seek the LORD Almighty and to entreat him."
- a) After all this happy talk about what'll happen to the Israelites. The last question in effect is what about the rest of the world? Is this joy just for Jewish people? To put this another way, what about all the Christians who consider God to be their God and trust in Him for the complete payment of their sins? Do they (us) get to share in all this joy?

- b) Remember the quote from Isaiah (repeated in Mark's Gospel) that says the house of God will be a temple for all nations? In effect, that's the issue here. Zechariah is predicting the future day (yes "millennial" time again) where non-Jewish people will go to Israel so they can see God. Yes Jerusalem gets millions of tourists today, but let's be honest, God is not there any more than He is anywhere else in the world. That's why I'm not "amillennial": A term that refers to Christians who don't take the millennium literally. Personally, I see a day where God Himself (i.e., Jesus as God) will literally rule the world from Jerusalem. It will cause a lot of people from around the world to say, "Hey, we should go visit there to see God as He rules over the world."
 - c) Yes this is the big "happy ending" to the Q&A session, but it's not the end of the book. By the way, we still have one more verse in Chapter 8 on the same topic. Let me cover it now and then I want to wrap it up with some closing comments:
21. Verse 23: This is what the LORD Almighty says: "In those days ten men from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, 'Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you.'
- a) A lot of commentators make a big deal about the fact it was "ten men from all languages". The short version is the number "ten" biblically is associated with "human completeness". Just as we have 10 fingers (including thumbs), often when the number ten is used in the bible it simply is a "shortcut" to represent something complete. Now you know that, we can move on from that bit of trivia.
 - b) The point is essentially the same as the previous few verses. When the Second Coming of Jesus happens, it won't be a "Jewish only" event. That makes sense simply considering all the multitudes of non-Jewish people who trust in Jesus as God as payment for our sins as well as one who guides our lives. Many bible commentators see this "ten" representing all of the non-Jewish nations that worship Jesus as God. Obviously Jewish bible experts don't see it that way and they see it as simply representatives of other countries wanting to see the Messiah who rules over the world. I'll take the Christian view, but I'm bias.
22. I want to end this lesson by coming back to my title of "What do we do in the meantime?" That is essentially, what Zechariah wanted to explain. As I've been pounding home this entire lesson, the issue isn't rituals, but our daily attitude about our trust in Jesus to guide our lives. It's about how we act as a witness for Him. I won't say any more about that here, other than the fact we should be using our time as a witness for Him and asking God to lead us as to how He wants us to do it.
- a) Before I do that, let me talk one more time about all this "glorious future": Let's be honest, it's been 2,000 years since Jesus literally roamed the earth. How do we know prophets like Zechariah weren't just having "weird dreams" in order to comfort the Israelites during the time when they were struggling to rebuild their homeland? How do we know for sure of Jesus' return when it has been that long? The answer is evidence. The reason the bible has about 30% of its text as predictions, is to validate it as the word of God. Most of them did already happen. Many of them were about Jesus First Coming and it happened just as it was predicted. My point is if we can trust those, why can't we trust all the ones that talk about His Second Coming? OK then why so long? Part of the answer is we would not be a part of it if it happened 100 years ago. God's waiting as long as He does as He wants to gather as many as possible to be a part of this eternal kingdom. Even with that said, there has to be a final person as heaven won't be "infinite" but finite in size.
 - b) OK then, prayer time about what God desires of us until all of this occurs.
23. Heavenly Father, since we're already grateful for what You've done for us, the big question for us is until You call us home, "now what"? Obviously we're free to do whatever we want as long as we're living under Your commands. Still, that leaves the question of what do you want us to do in the meantime? Yes we get "being fair and just". Over and above that, make it obvious to us how we can be a witness for You. Make it obvious what You desire of us as we use our lives as a living witness for You. We ask this in Jesus name, Amen.