

Harvest

Evangelical Free Church

SERIES: Confidence in a Broken World • Lesson 7
 For Adult Bible Fellowships and Small Groups April 25– May 1, 2010

Join us in being on mission with God!

OUR VISION

To continually mature and grow as a united body of Jesus-imitators who live out God’s greatest commandment to “Love” by exalting God and serving one another, and His greatest commission to “Go” by reaching into and shaping our local, regional, and global communities.

“How Religion Leads to Disaster”

Zechariah Chapter 7

Getting Started

After an introductory time, discuss the following questions in your group or class.

Traditions are great ways of creating memories that you want to repeat or add to. Check the box in front of any of the traditions below that have been part of your past to a greater or lesser degree:

- Coloring or hunting for Easter Eggs on Easter.
- Setting off fireworks on the 4th of July.
- Getting some new clothes for school in the fall.
- Visiting relatives on Thanksgiving.
- Watching the Superbowl with friends or family.
- Attending child dedication or baptism in your extended family.
- Decorating one or more graves on Memorial Day.
- Traveling to some new adventure spot hopefully once each summer.
- Enjoying a regular date night with your mate.
- Watching youth softball in the summer or school football in the fall.
- Checking out the stores on “Black Friday”
- Eating a certain food on a Thanksgiving or Christmas holiday.
- Sitting in a certain location for Sunday worship.
- Planning an annual fishing, skiing, camping, or other kind of sports-related trip.

Q: What are the benefits of building traditions into the rhythm of your life?

Q: What are some of the problems that can occur when traditions become absolutely essential parts of your life?

Religious Traditions

One of the parts of life where tradition tends to flourish relates to our religious lives. The Muslims fast during Ramadan and encourage pilgrimages to Mecca. Some upper-caste Hindus practice the “sacred thread ceremony” when their children are initiated into formal education. For many in India, the betrothal of the young couple and the exact date and time of the wedding are matters decided by the parents in consultation with astrologers. In the Russian Orthodox Church, the celebration of Easter includes greeting others by kissing one another and announcing, “Christ arise!” Believers also give one another red eggs. The traditional Easter foods are a



Zechariah 7:1-14

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?" 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?" 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

nut and fruit filled yeast cake called *kulich* and an accompanying sweet cheese spread called *paskha*.

In America, Western Christmas and Easter celebrations tend to combine religious elements with secular ones. In the list below, identify which of the following parts of American religious traditions are cultural, and which ones are spiritual:

Cultural	Spiritual	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Decorating a Christmas tree.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Giving, eating or re-gifting fruitcake.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Celebrating the 12 days of Christmas.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Sending Christmas cards.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Singing Christmas carols from house to house.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Hanging a stocking.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Sending gifts to loved ones.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Displaying a manger scene.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Attending a Christmas eve religious service.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Lighting Advent candles.

Religious traditions for the returning Jews.

As you look at verses 1-4, they set the stage for a question that seemed very important to some of the Jews

1. The revelation to Zechariah in this chapter was a response to a question that was asked. The exact date is given in verse 1. It translates to December 7, 518 B.C. What city sent messengers to ask Zechariah this question? (See verse 2.)

Note: Some see Bethel not as a city name, but as a compound name for a person (seen elsewhere as Bethel-Sharezer). So it may not refer to a location, but to a person. Some commentators believe that the delegation was very formal and came directly from Jews in Babylon. We will assume that Bethel is a place name, as the NIV and the NASB translate the verse.

2. How many people came to Jerusalem with this question? To whom was the question originally addressed?

3. When did they come? (See verse 1.) Were they asking a question about just before practicing the fast, or after the practice of the fast for that year was over?

4. Summarize the question (Verse 3) in your own words.

5. Why do you think this question was so important to the people of Bethel that they sent a delegation to Jerusalem to find an answer? What does it say about their understanding of God? What do they seem to think is important to God?

How Religion Leads to Disaster

fatherless, the alien or the poor. In your hearts do not think evil of each other.’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.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.’



Sometimes we approach our faith in an odd way because we can focus on secondary issues that are not urgently important to God. Our burning question on a Sunday morning might be, “Will the service make me late for lunch?” or “Are they going to sing one of my favorite songs this morning?” or “It was a bit cool last Sunday. Will it be warmer today?” These are not bad questions, but they are obviously not central to worship. Zechariah’s response to the inquiry takes the people to the spiritual dynamics behind the question.

6. In verse 5, Zechariah refers to a practice that lasted 70 years. What 70-year period is he speaking about? See 2 Chronicles 36:20-21 and Jeremiah 25:11.

The people wondered what the right month for fasting should be, now that they were back in the land of their forefathers. While in captivity, they had declared a fast during two different months.

7. What had happened on the fifth month according to 2 Kings 25:8?
- _____
- _____
8. What had happened on the seventh month according to 2 Kings 25:5 and Jeremiah 41:1?
- _____
- _____

God’s Response

1. God ignores the question of which month is best in his response to the people in verses 5-6. What is the point of God’s two questions?
- _____
- _____
2. Two of the most important celebrations for Christians are Easter and Christmas. What are some of the questions we might ask to find out if our celebration of either holiday is for *us* or for *God*?
- _____
- _____
3. Why do you think God points the people back to the time when the city was prosperous and the country was at peace in verse 7? What is he trying to get them to understand?
- _____
- _____
4. List the expectations of God for the Jews who were rebuilding the temple and the country. What does God seem to focus on as *His* priorities for them?
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

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5. Verses 11-12 present an historical lesson about how their forefathers responded to God's expectations of them. List some of the ways they fell short of what God desired for them. What would that kind of behavior look like today?

6. Through the prophet, God recalls his response to their choices. What were some of the consequences God brought about because they chose to disregard God and do what felt best instead?

Application

1. What are some of the ways in which we are tempted to focus on relatively insignificant things in our service to God? Why do we sometimes find it easier to focus on these kinds of issues?

2. How would you respond to someone who taught that this passage encourages us to simply love people and not be worried about doctrine?

3. If you were to list 2-3 **big** things God would want you to focus on in following him in the months ahead, what would you include on your list?

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