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How often should we come to Church? Once a week? Twice a week? Every time there is a service on? Or is that a bit much in the midst of our super busy life style? Well then is it OK to come once a fortnight then? Once a month maybe? Once in a while perhaps?

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It is a good question because Church habits in Australia are definitely changing. In the distant past there was nothing else to do on a Sunday except Church & so many of our older members were brought up on Church in the morning, at night & Sunday school sometime in between. I suspect that many of us when we started going to Church under our own steam chose either the morning service or the evening service and always went each week. But my colleagues and I have noticed recently that our regulars are coming less and less. Today coming once a fortnight is the new definition of a regular and committed Church goer.

But being a Christian is not just about going to Church is it? So how often and how much should you give to the Church? How often should you help out at Church? How often should you have a quiet time of Bible reading and prayer with God? How often should we fast?

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Well the question of how often we should fast is where the book of Zechariah turns to next. But before we get there can I step back for a brief moment and look at the whole of the book of Zechariah to see why this is the issue that Zechariah turns to next. Zechariah started with a bang with a call to repent. Verse 3, *“This is what the Lord Almighty says: ‘Return to me and I will return to you.”* And then we have been given, over the next 6 chapters, 8 visions of what the coming of that God’s kingdom to his people actually looks like.

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And in chapters 9 to 14, we’re going to have another 6 chapters about what it is going to look like when God’s king comes to claim God’s kingdom. So the pivot, the hinge between those two halves of the book, the coming kingdom in chapters 1 to 6, & the coming King in chapters 9 to 14, is right here in chapter 7 and 8. This is the heart of the issue. How should God’s people respond to the coming of God’s kingdom and the coming of God’s King & it is all has to do with fasting? Surely not! Well let’s have a look then at our passage.

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1. **Fasting (chapter 7)**

“*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-Melek, 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?”*

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Should I mourn and fast in the fifth month? Not one of those burning questions that people are asking today. But an important question for the people who have come back from the exile and are rebuilding their lives as well as their Temple. You see the fast for the fifth month was a fast to remember the destruction of the Temple some 68 years ago. This was

like Armistice Day, Anzac Day, the Bali bombings, the Port Arthur massacre and the black Friday bushfires all rolled into one for the Jewish people.

God had let their enemies pummel them, destroy them, exile them because of their sinful behavior and so the people of God had mourned and fasted every year since that awful day. You know occasionally there is a disaster in Australia and the Prime Minister calls for a day of mourning. It used to be a day of mourning and prayer but as a nation we don’t believe in prayer anymore unfortunately. But even before that it used to a day of mourning, prayer & fasting. And that is what the Jews have been doing for a couple of generations up to now.

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But the Temple is now almost rebuilt, the exile is now almost over so do we need to keep fasting for a destroyed temple? And how often should we fast anyway?

What would you say if you were asked that question today? Fasting is certainly one of those topics that divides the Christian Church. Some say they have found fasting as a really good way of concentrating their time and energy on their relationship with God and so we should be doing it not just on the fifth month but actually on a regular basis. While others say there is almost no mention of fasting at all in the NT. In fact those who do fast, the Pharisees are slammed by Jesus for doing just the external things without any change of their hearts.

So the people of Bethel ask should we fast? And they expected a yes or no answer. Well you never get a yes or no answer from a preacher do you? Instead we get a three point sermon! Let that be a warning to you. For Zechariah looks beyond the issue of fasting and asks his questioners three searching questions. The first one was, what motivates you to fast?

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***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?*

When you fasted did you do it for God or for yourself? When you feasted did you do it for God or yourself? You see the motivation as to why you do something is as important as the act itself. You can give up fish for lent, you can invite your family around for a Christmas Day feast, you can come to Church twice a week but if you are doing it for yourself then it is not going to achieve anything positive in your relationship with God, it will just lead to pride.

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Fasting in the Old Testament was a means of expressing repentance and longing for God.  So Joel 2:12, *“Even now, declares the Lord,* ***return to me with all your hearts*** *with fasting and weeping and mourning.”*  Fasting was a sign of returning to God. Ezra 8:21, “*I proclaim the fast* ***so that we might humble ourselves*** *before God.”* Fasting was about the ache of the soul for God, a longing for more of God.  John Piper says that “*Christian fasting, at its root*, *is the hunger of a homesickness for God*.” When you fasted, Zechariah asks did you do it for God?

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But then Zechariah asks a second searching question about not just their motivation but the manner in which they live as they fast.*”* ***8****And the word of the Lord came again to Zechariah:****9****“This is what the Lord Almighty said: ‘Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another.****10****Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or*

*the poor. Do not plot evil against each other.*’

If while you spend your time fasting, you hunger for God **then God’s ways will rub off on you**. If instead of spending the time preparing and eating your food you spend that time in the very presence of God then God’s holiness and God’s heart will change your lifestyle. And God is a God of justice, so he wants to right wrongs amongst his people. And God is a God of mercy, he wants to forgive and restore relationships. And because God is a God of compassion, he does care for the most vulnerable among you – he has a special place in his heart for the widow, the orphan, the foreigner, the refugee, the poor.

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You see what’s been happening? On the outside the Jews have looked like they have been seeking God, fasting, worshipping & tithing but underneath, on the inside there is an indifference to those in need. There is no love for their neighbour. There has been no change of lifestyle. Fasting then is not about us stopping eating but us stopping our sin.

Now that was a problem that had reached epidemic proportions amongst the people of Zechariah’s time and it is still a problem for us today and Zechariah here is calling us to face up to it.  It is no kind of Christianity to come to worship and then live as you please. You can’t come to Church on a Sunday then just ignore the plight of the refugee on a Monday. You can’t sing your hymns and then go home and beat your wife or your children. You can’t fast and then do nothing about the plight of the homeless in your suburb.

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Christianity is not a matter of words, or outward show. It is about a changed life.  And so Zechariah calls his people and he calls us, to repent, to care and serve those around us, to administer justice because God’s ways have rubbed off on us. Doesn’t James say something similar? “*If anyone thinks he is religious & does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart this person’s religion is worthless.  Religion that is pure & undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans & widows in their affliction & to keep oneself unstained from the world*”

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Zechariah asks three searching questions concerning their fasting. What motivated you to fast? What manner of life did your fasting produce? Lastly what is the heart of the matter of fasting? ***11****“But they refused to pay attention; stubbornly they turned their backs and covered 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”.*

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The heart of the matter was the matter of the heart. The Jews of the past fasted but their hearts were as hard as stone. The Jews of the past fasted but they turned their backs on the word of God. The Jews of the past were not moving closer to God while they fasted, their hearts were actually moving away from God. The people’s religion did not penetrate their hearts. “The first & great work of a Christian,” wrote Richard Baxter, “is about his heart.”

What Zechariah is saying to his people and to us is that the matter of the heart needs to be

considered. You can sing, pray, fast, go to Church & listen to all the sermons you can find. You can give generously and serve selflessly all the remaining days of your life, you can do all that and still be lost forever because you didn’t understand that the heart of the matter was a matter of the heart, that it begins with the heart, that what you need is a new heart.

How do we get a new heart? Will fasting do it for you? Will going to Church twice a week do

that for you? Will tithing of your money and your herbs do that for you? No only God can do that for you. That why James 4:8 says *“Draw near to God & He will draw near to you; cleanse your hands you sinners and purify your hearts you double-minded*” God has to clean your heart. And mine. God has to give us a heart transplant. A heart that trusts in Jesus, a heart that has been made new by His grace, is a heart that bears good fruit in a changed life.

So how does God do that? How is God going to change his people’s hearts? He will do that when his kingdom comes into this world. He will do that through his appointed king, Jesus. He will do it by His grace. We won’t do it be able to do that ourselves through our religious acts & so this hinge passage moved from the question of fasting to the reality of God

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1. **Fastening** Himself to the people of God. (chapter 8:1-17)

For now we see for the second time in our passage that the word of the Lord Almighty comes to Zechariah. God speaks again through his prophet. The emphasis here is not what we do for God but what God has promised to do for us and in us and through us. And so the next 17 verses gives us, in the words of my old theological lecturer Barry Webb, a “*seven hued rainbow*” declaring God’s trustworthy promises that can melt any heart.

And this is where I want to skip through our passage a bit quicker than normal. I wanted to preach on both chapters 7 and 8 because they both answer the question from the people of Bethel but that will mean we have less time than I would like to unpack these promises that God hangs in the sky before us like a majestic rainbow. So I am sorry about that.

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There are seven promises that God makes to his people in this passage and they each begin with the words “*This is what the Lord Almighty says.”* The first one being in verse 2, *“This is what the Lord Almighty says: “I am very jealous for Zion; I am burning with jealousy for her.*”

I love you God says to his people. I love you like a bridegroom loves his bride. I am jealous for you. I don’t want you to be with any other god than me. Isn’t that amazing? That God loves us, cares for us has committed himself to us. Doesn’t that get to our heart? Doesn’t that show that God is trying to woo us? Won’t that change everything? But there is more.

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***3****This is what the Lord says: “I will return to Zion & dwell in Jerusalem. Then Jerusalem will be called the Faithful City & the mountain of the Lord Almighty will be called the Holy Mountain*  I love you & I am coming to you. I am going to live with you & if I come and live in Jerusalem with my people, then that city will be called a faithful city, that place will be a called a holy place. Because my character and my heart **will rub off** onto your character and your heart.

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But there is more. ***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 of them with cane in hand because of their age.****5****The city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there*.” I love you, I am coming to live amongst you and I will fix everything. When there is war and poverty who cops it the most? The elderly and the young do.

The elderly because they have less mobility and the young because you can’t put an old

head on young children. And so even when the exiles had returned, the elderly probably

haven’t come home because it was such a long and dangerous journey. And for the parents it would be a dangerous place to raise the young. But God is going to fix it all up. He will provide a place where the old can sit safely in the town square and the young can enjoy themselves by kicking a soccer ball around. Trust me God says I am fixing things up.

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And I am just getting warmed up! ***6 “****This is what the Lord Almighty says: “It may seem marvellous to the remnant of this people at that time, but will it seem marvellous to me?” declares the Lord Almighty”.* If you think what has happened in the past is good news, just wait until you see what I will do into the future! Yes I might have brought a tiny nation back from the brink but I have plans for the whole world. I’m just getting started!

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***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*.” I will save you. You can’t save yourself, you can’t bring about this transformation in your own power. I have to save you and I will save you. And my salvation will be evident to all when I bring people from the four corners of the globe back to Jerusalem, back to my chosen city. And they will be my people.

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And I will make them strong. **9 “***This is what the Lord Almighty says: “Now hear these words, ‘Let your hands be strong so that the temple may be built.’ …  I will give all these things as an inheritance to the remnant of this people.****13****Just as you, Judah and Israel, have been a curse among the nations, so I will save you, and you will be a blessing. Do not be afraid, but let your hands be strong*.”

This is getting better and better. Just like God promised Abraham in Genesis 12, I will bless you with strength, with my inheritance, with my goodness and through these blessings you are to bless the entire world. And then finally I am changing you. Slide 22

***14****This is what the Lord Almighty says: “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 each other, and do not love to swear falsely. I hate all this,” declares the Lord.*

I will change you. Real change doesn’t come through outward acts of devotion. Real changes doesn’t come when we fast or tithe or come to Church. Real changes comes when God changes our heart. When God’s grace and presence and power flood into our lives. And so change happens not through a ritual but a relationship. When what we do draws on the heavenly resources offered to us not when we draw upon the earthly resources we have within us. And that fastening of ourselves to God in our passage leads not to fasting but

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1. **Feasting. (chapter 8:18-23)**

***18 “****The word of the Lord Almighty came to me”.* We are now in the third and last section of our passage. **19 “***This is what the Lord Almighty says: “The fasts of the fourth, fifth, seventh & tenth months will become joyful and glad occasions and happy festivals for Judah. Therefore love truth and peace*.”

God is turning our fasts into feasts. Rather than fasting four times for what happened with the destruction of the Jewish temple, in the future you will spend your time being thankful

rather than mourning. Rejoicing over what God has done rather than weeping over what

has happened in the past. And these feasts will lead to people coming from everywhere.

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***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.*” The crowds will stream into Jerusalem. They will come from east and west, north and south. Marvelling at God’s power. Amazed at God promised. Astonished at God’s presence.

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***23****This is what the Lord Almighty says: “In those days ten people 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.’”* Because God is with us. God is in our midst. The power then doesn’t come from our spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting and Church. It comes from God Himself. His promises. His power. His presence makes all the difference.

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And we see that comes true when Jesus, God own son, Emmanual, God is with us, comes back from the dead, goes to heaven and then sends his Church the Holy Spirit. On the day of Pentecost people from every nation come streaming into Jerusalem. The Church is filled with the very presence of God. And the people of God are filled with joy, even in the midst of persecution they rejoice that they are worthy to suffer the same fate as the King Jesus.

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So let’s draw some threads together shall we. *How often should we fast?* Well only one fast was prescribed in the OT, on the Day of Atonement, a day that points forward to the time when on the cross of Christ the lamb of God Jesus takes away the sins of the world. & there are no prescribed fasts in the NT. But Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount about doing the outward acts of righteousness for show, he says *“When you fast.”* He **assumes** we will fast. But we don’t **have** to. And we don’t do it to become holy but to humble ourselves and draw upon the heavenly bread of life offered to us through a relationship with Jesus Christ.

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And how often should we go to Church? Well the book of Hebrews says “*Don’t give up the habit of meeting together.*” It should be a habit to come and worship God. But there is no right answer but each time we come to Church it is not about what we are doing for God, it is about drawing upon the heavenly reserves, trusting in the heavenly promises, relying upon the heavenly power that is available when God is with us as a community. And so if God is truly with us, as he has promised, we would want to come here as much as possible.

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But the key thing is not how often you fast or how often you go to church but whether God

has changed you & is changing you. Whether God has brought about a radical transformation in your life. Where there is a joy to your walk. Where there is a concern for the vulnerable. Where there is a hunger for a closer walk with God. And whether on a regular basis you are connecting up to the source of oil that will enable you to be the light of the world. Not through ritual or rule keeping but through a relationship with God Son Jesus.

Let’s pray. We are going to sing what might seem to be a strange choice of song next, the Christmas Carol, Joy to the World. It just struck me how the words of this carol flow out of what I have been saying. “*Joy to the World, the Lord has come, let earth receive her king, let*

*every heart prepare him room and heaven and nature sing*”.