From Fasting to Feasting

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Preacher: Donald Smith

[0:00] Have you ever left a job half done?! Maybe I can be a bit bolder with that question.

! When was the last time you left a job half done? You start off with buckets loads of enthusiasm, but by the time you thought you'd be finished, it looks like you've barely started.
The zeal fades, discouragement sets in, the tools get put down. Such is the story of our garden fence.
It looked pretty sad when we first moved in, and emboldened with visions of a kind of glorious medium oak finish, right around the perimeter, resplendent in the garden, out came the paintbrush, on went the American football top that my wife despises, and the painting began.
But it wasn't long. Actually, no, I suppose the problem was, it was far too long before I'd managed even the first five meters. I thought it might take an afternoon.
[1:09] A month later, I was looking at a job not nearly half done, and found myself kind of slowly convincing myself and my wife that the unpainted wood actually looked quite good with the overgrown lawn, and the out of control shrubbery.

To begin with, right, the thought of a finished fence got me going. But it wasn't long before the head dropped, so that no longer was I kind of excited about the finished product.
I was discouraged by the unexpectedly hard work it had been to get to the seemingly not very far along the road point that I was at. And I confess, I'm still at today.
If any of you fancy painting a fence, let me know. Although you probably actually have to start from the beginning, because the bit I had painted, it's been two years, and it's looking a bit worn down too. Now, that is the tail of our fence.
Maybe it resembles something of the Christian life. Often the early days, aren't they, are full of zeal and enthusiasm? But it's not long before we realise this is harder work than we thought it was going to be.
[2:19] And the finish line isn't nearly as close as we hoped it would be. But what happens when we come up against that reality?

The temptation, isn't it, is to drop our heads, to be discouraged about where we still are, about the seemingly small distance we have covered, to down tools and lament our lack of progress.
Look how little I've done. If that's where you feel you are, I think there's a delegation from Bethel that can sympathise with you.
We are picking up where we left off in Zechariah a few months ago. We're really kind of in the deep end of the Old Testament here, in what will be to many of us an unfamiliar prophetic book.
Zechariah was a millennium, right, a thousand years after Exodus, where we were this morning.
That's a long time, isn't it? The Old Testament covers a long, long period of time. In that time, right, God's people had been, well, obviously brought out of Egypt, brought into the Promised Land, and then kicked out of the Promised Land.
[3:32] We'll learn why in a few minutes. But now, in Zechariah's day, they are back again. But the Jerusalem they have returned to is not what it once was.

The city has been devastated. The walls are in ruins. The temple was flattened. And so the people arrived back discouraged.
They got going, but opposition quickly arose. They were faced with a seemingly impossible task.
Still surrounded by enemies, it would have been easy to turn up, give up and turn around. That was true physically.
It was also true spiritually. There was a temple that needed rebuilding. But even more importantly than that, there were hearts that needed to be repenting.

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And that is where the book of Zechariah began. A call to repent, return to the Lord. And as the people set out on that path of repentance, the Lord gave Zechariah a series of visions.
[4:39] I don't know if you remember them. They were pretty wild, weren't they? But they were given to show the people who had turned towards him what lay ahead. It was the picture of the finished product, right, the medium oak brushed over every surface, except even better.

It was a great motivation for God's people to get going on the path of repentance. But, actually very much like our garden fence, two years later, they were not there yet.
In fact, the visions of Zechariah 1-6 still no doubt felt very far away. This week we are picking up from the very next verse of the book.
But one verse on, two years have passed, and not a whole lot seems to have changed. I wonder if that sounds familiar. They set off on the path of repentance with a spring in their step.
A couple of years later, the zeal has faded, and there still seems so much left to do. That, I think, is where the people are in Zechariah 7. Their heads have dropped.
[5:50] They see how much work there still is to do, and so they come with a question. A question. There in verses one to three. And it comes from a delegation of people sent from a place called Bethel, not far away from Jerusalem.

These people come to the priests and the prophets to entreat the favor of the Lord. Right? That is good. That is a good thing. They are wanting to do the right thing. They're like students who want to learn, coming to their teacher, and their question is this, verse three.
Should I weep and abstain in the fifth month? As I have done for so many years. At some point in the past, God's people had instituted a fast in the fifth month.
We learn later on there were more fasts in the fourth, seventh, and tenth months as well. And the language of the question there, doesn't it, tells us what that fast looked like. Should we weep?
It's not exactly a party, is it? Should we keep on lamenting that the state of God's kingdom on earth? Should we lament how little progress we've made in rebuilding your temple, your dwelling place on earth?
[7:08] That is the question on their lips. Should we be sad about how little progress we've made, and how far we've still got to go? We don't know what kind of response that the Bethelites were expecting.

If they were expecting a simple yes or no, they would have initially been quite disappointed. But as they listened, any initial disappointment would have soon faded.
Because the answer the Lord gives by the end of chapter eight is better than any they could have imagined. Before we get into the answer itself, though, I think it's important we take note of who is responding here.
Did you notice it as we read it? That Zechariah is relaying the message, isn't he? But the message from whom? It's not just God, it is God.
But what one particular title of God comes again and again and again here? The answer comes from the Lord of hosts.
[8:20] We've seen that before in Zechariah, Zechariah, the Lord of armies, the Lord Almighty, the one who cannot be conquered, the one whose will cannot be thwarted, whose enemies cannot stand before him.

Because he is the Lord of hosts, what he says he will do, he will do. And that point is really driven home in these chapters.
Verse four of chapter seven, the word of the Lord of hosts. Verse nine, thus says the Lord of hosts. Verse two of chapter eight, thus says the Lord of hosts.
Verse four, thus says the Lord of hosts. Verse six, thus says the Lord of hosts. Verse seven, verse nine, thus says the Lord of hosts. We could go on and on. It's a title that comes a lot in Zechariah, nearly 50 times, and yet it is here in these chapters that the concentration reaches its peak.
24 times in these chapters alone. Thus says the Lord of hosts. Listen to me, believe me. Know that what I will is what will happen.
[9:36] Nothing can stop me. As we hear the Lord's answer. Know that these words, these promises, the future that the Lord presents to his people is more reliable, more sure, more certain than the rising and setting of the sun.

In his response, the Lord takes his people on a kind of whistle-stops tour of redemptive history from curse to blessing, from condemnation to salvation, from desolation to restoration.

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And the Lord of hosts says it all to answer this question about fasting. To instruct those who are wearying in the fight.
To encourage those who have set off in a life of repentance, but are feeling a bit down about how far they've got. Four things that a wearying people are to do in light of all the Lord says here.
We're going to take them one at a time. Let's begin there with the first, the rest of chapter seven, with a warning to watch our hearts.
[10:59] The people ask a question. The Lord responds with a question of his own. When you fasted and mourned in the fifth month and in the seventh, for these 70 years, was it for me that you fasted?

The answer is in verse six. Do you not eat for yourselves and drink for yourselves? God is not condemning fasting here.
Fasting isn't the problem. The problem was the heart behind these fasts because the people had replaced the righteousness that the Lord required with rituals that he did not.
They had ignored God's law and made their own law and started measuring themselves against their own standards. One that was based not on righteousness, but on rituals.
And you can see how that has seeped into the culture of God's people and the question they were asking. These people from Bethel, we want to commend what they're doing.
[12:11] They were seeking to entreat the Lord's favor. They were wanting to do what was pleasing to God. And the question they asked was about fasting in the fifth month.

It's a bit like maybe someone today asking their minister, will God be happy with me if I go to church twice on a Sunday?
There's much more that needs unpacked there, isn't there? Before the Lord answers the question, he says, hold on a minute.
Where's your heart in this? Are you wanting to do it for me or for you? Are you listening to me or are you wanting to set up your own standards to tell yourself you're doing a good job?
It's a big difference, isn't there? Two people who come to two services every Sunday. One of them doing so out of a love and devotion to God, wanting to worship Him and hear His words.
[13:20] The other are coming out of habits, coming to just clear their conscience at the start of every week so they can crack on doing what they want Monday to Saturday. Watch your heart.

Why are you doing what you're doing? To press at home the point, the Lord of hosts gives a kind of rerun of history of what happened in the years before the exile to warn the people what lies further down the path of ignoring Him, of doing things for themselves and setting up their own measure of righteousness.
Verse 9, right? He never commanded fasts. They weren't necessarily bad things to add on. There's times in the Old Testament where they're clearly good things for the people to be doing, but they were not in His law.
There was a single day of fasting required. Here they had many. The Lord had not commanded them. What He had commanded, verse 9, truth, kindness, mercy, compassion.
That is what He wanted. Not fast, but faithfulness. But that is not what He received. Feel the force of verse 11.
[14:39] They refused to pay attention. Turned a stubborn shoulder. Stopped their ears that they might not hear.

They made their hearts diamond hard lest they should hear the law and the words that the Lord of hosts had sent by a Spirit through the former prophets.
Here's that, right? This is a dangerous confession to make. Our youngest son, right, seems to have an amazing ability to wake up just as my wife and I are drifting off to sleep.
It's uncanny. He's rarely happy about the situation. We never are. Sometimes, okay, sometimes, when I'm very tired and desperate just to fall asleep, instead of responding to my son's cries, I'm a side sleeper, as everyone should be.
It's natural. The head's kind of on the pillow. And sometimes, okay, in my less commendable moments, an arm just kind of so happens to rise above and place itself just over my ear. Right?
[15:53] Sorry, microphone people. Or, right, a pillow kind of spontaneously wraps itself around my head. I'm a sinner, right? That shouldn't come as a surprise to you.

Let me assure you, Finn has never been left too long. But that's not a great response, is it?
Because the fall in logic inside my head goes something like, right, if I can't hear him, that then I can

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maybe slowly convince myself that he doesn't want anything from me.
And so I don't have to do anything. Condemn my parenting afterwards. For now, come back to verse 11. God's people had pulled the pillow over their heads, choosing not to listen in order to justify to themselves a lack of obedience to God's law.
Right? That they were living like this. So that when God spoke, they looked at one another, like, I went, did you hear something? Didn't hear anything.
Deliberately shutting out God's law so that they wouldn't have to respond to it. And instead of obeying his law, that they made up their own. With their ears still covered.
[17:11] They're looking at each other. Not sure what God wants us to do. How about a fast? Why not four of them? All the while, God is shouting through his prophets, right? Not ritual, righteousness.

But they refuse to listen. They keep the pillow over their heads. The result was diamond-hard hearts. They stopped using their ears.
It's like when you stop using a car, it doesn't kind of stay in pristine condition, does it? It deteriorates. The battery goes flat. The tires deflate. The brakes seize. They covered their ears for so long that they'd stopped working.
Their hearts seized so that even God's word could not penetrate them. It's a pretty frightening thought, but not as frightening as the consequences.
They stopped listening to the Lord, so he stopped listening to them. He scattered them. He left the land desolate. What's the warning?
[18:23] What's your heart? There are two possible hearts behind the question of fasting. There are two different hearts behind, well, any religious-looking activity, even coming to church on a Sunday.

One might do so out of a desire to draw near to God. Another might well do it in order to justify not listening to God. I've done my bit. I've been to church.
I'm covered. Now I can crack on with living life my way. The Lord says, watch out. Watch your heart. Never replace righteousness with ritual. And that, I think, is something you really need to guard against the longer you're a Christian.
Because the battle doesn't get any easier, does it? If anything, it gets harder. And the temptation can be, can't it, why not make it feel more manageable?
Why not set up a few kind of tick-bock exercises through the week, through the year, check them off, and feel like I'm coasting along just fine? The Lord says to people wearying on the journey, watch your heart.
[19:45] Who are you doing it all for? Who are you living for? Who do you want to please? Watch your heart.

Secondly, we're going to start moving a little more quickly now. Strengthen your hands. But because of the kind of diamond-hard hearts of his people, the Lord had left the land desolate. That is what had happened, and there was a warning there. But that is not where God's people are in the day of Zechariah. But they're not, are they out of the land that has been left desolate?
It's not desolate because there's people in it, and it is these people. Something has changed. Not because the people have sorted themselves out, but because the Lord has returned to Zion.
Just look there, verse 2 of chapter 8 with me. Thus says the Lord of hosts, I am jealous for Zion with great jealousy, and I am jealous for her with great wrath.
[20:52] Thus says the Lord, I have returned to Zion, and willed well in the midst of Jerusalem. And Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city, and the mountain of the Lord of hosts, the holy mountain.

But there are 10, thus says the Lord, in chapter 8, and every one of them introduces more good news for God's people. The city is being restored because God is amongst them.
He's not waiting for them to finish his temple before he moves back in. He is there with them, working with them to restore his city, his people, to something better than they have ever seen.
The place where it will be full of life, verse 4 and 5. People will grow old. I might not have initially seen a good thing, but a place without old people is a place that's been ruined by war, isn't it? Marred by the loss of life. That is not this place. People will grow old, lasting peace. The streets will be filled with youths, teeming with wife. Gathered from afar, verse 7. I'll save my people from the east country and the west country and bring them to dwell in the midst of Jerusalem.

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[22:10] And they shall be my people. And I will be their gods. It might well feel like the day of small things now.

The work might feel tiresome. The progress might seem slow. But progress is being made.
The work is being done. And it is being done because the Lord is with his people. That is assurance for us as it was for them, greater assurance for us.
Because the Lord does not, does he dwell in a city in a foreign nation or in a man-made temple in a faraway land? He dwells with us. With you.
You are not working alone. You might look at your life and wonder where the progress is. Well, look where you began and see where you are now.
[23:20] Know that while day by day it might feel painfully slow, progress is being made. Look at your church family and see the same. The work is ongoing because the Lord is with his people.

Renewing them. Restoring us. And so the Lord says, verse 9, again in verse 13, let your hands be strong.
It is an encouragement to God's people to keep on working. They are building a temple. It's not even halfway built yet. They are wondering whether to do tools.
Should we just lament what's going on? And God says, don't weep. Work. Don't drop your head down and mourn. Don't grieve that where you are now is not where you hoped you would be.
That is what they were doing in their fasts. Mourning the fact that Jerusalem was not the kind of glorious, bustling city they hoped it would be. Lamenting that the temple wasn't finished yet.
[24:22] Despairing that it all looked a bit sad like a partially painted garden fence. Perhaps we can be tempted to do that with Christ's church.

Or with our own faith. Looking at it and thinking, that's not quite how I hoped it would look by now. And throw ourselves a pity party. Lamenting the far from finished work.
But here the Lord says, lift your head up. Look at what God is doing through you and get to work. Strengthen your hands.
Get going. Keep going. Because if you keep going, the days are coming. Says the Lord of hosts. When there will be nothing to weep over.
Don't live in the past. Don't get stuck in the present. Don't despair at the sin you see in your own life now. But get to work knowing that God is with you. He's not waiting for you to finish the job before he comes in.
[25:30] He's with you now. To help you work. Don't lament the state of the church. But work to build the church. We're doing the passion for life stuff at the moment in our prayer meeting and life groups.

Hopefully that is doing something of this. Strengthening our hands for the work of building up Christ's church. Making disciples. It would be so easy, wouldn't it? To come together every Wednesday evening in the hall downstairs.
And despair over the state of the church in Scotland. To mournfully talk about how it's not like it used to be. To lament the lack of Christians.
To grieve the church buildings that are closing down. Should we weep? No, the Lord says, work. Strengthen your hands.
Because as meager as what we see might seem, there is a construction project ongoing. Not visible on earth, but very much visible from heaven. Hearts being restored.
[26:35] God's people being made new. You are part of that project if your faith is in Christ. So keep on going. Strengthen your hands because God is doing great things.

Even in the day of small things. And as you get to work, make sure you pick up the right tools. Our third point here, love, truth and peace.
We're not going to spend too much time here because it's really just the kind of overflow of watching our hearts and strengthening our hands. But we do want to zoom in here because, well the text zooms in here in verses 14 to 17.
That the Lord has purposed good for his people. In spite of their past sin, he will relent from his wrath. That is what he will do. And yet he calls his people to do something too.
Right, really helpfully. We've got a study coming up, thinking about God's role in ours, work of New Covenant temple building. Come along on Wednesday. But as the Lord promises good to come, he simultaneously commands his people to live in righteousness.

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[27:52] Right, what God commanded his people to do in the past, and they did not do, he commands his people in the present, speak the truth to one another. Do what is just. Do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.

Love no false oath. You can hear the New Testament echoes, can't you? This is the life Jesus calls us to live. It's like a preview of the Sermon on the Mount. There's enough in there, even in that verse, just to spend a sermon on.
We're not going to do that. I think what we want to notice here, though, is how those commands to live a life of righteousness flow straight from God's promise to do good to his people. It's not a price we pay, is it?
It's not an entrance fee. It's not something we do to stay right before God. We have that in Jesus. And when our faith is in him, nothing can take it away.
But this command to righteous living is like being told to get ready for a wedding. The wedding invite's not conditional on the clothes you wear. And yet, if you have any love for those whose wedding you are going to, you make sure you're ready for them, don't you?
[29:05] You put on the right clothes. The Lord's calling us to get to work. And he says, make sure you take the right tools with you.

You take what is expected of you because you want to labor for the Lord who has saved you. Not to get in his good books, but because that is what a love towards him will do. Looking forward to heaven and yet living an unrighteous life.
It's like getting ready for a wedding by putting our fence painting outfit on. The Lord of hosts says, get ready. Love, truth and peace.
You're righteous. Do the good works I have saved you for. And if we love him, we will long to clothe ourselves in those very things. Paul says in his letter to the Colossians, put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness and patience, bearing with one another, and if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other.
As we do the work of building Christ's church, these are the tools we ought to be wielding. The work clothes that we go out with. Speaking the truth, pursuing peace, showing mercy, loving justice.
[30:29] They are beautiful clothes to fit in in a beautiful city. A beautiful city that will also be a bustling city. Watch your heart, strengthen your hands, love, truth and peace.

And then finally, do not weep, but rejoice. Rejoice. The Bibleites came with a question.
Should we weep? Hopefully by this point in the Lord's response, the answer is obvious. Now is not a season for weeping, but rejoicing.
But rejoicing. However much you might feel is still left to do, however little you feel you have come in the last year, the last five years, the last 50 years.
Now is not the time for lamenting in the past. The past is to be learned from, but not lived in. Nor are we even to live in the present.
[31:32] This is a call to live in the future. A certain future that the Lord of hosts has said is coming. We can keep on working and we can rejoice now, even in the day of small things, because of where we know we are going.

The people wondered if they should keep on weeping, because they did not look forward. And often the past is painful, isn't it?
Often the present is difficult. The challenges seem overwhelming. The finish line seems miles and miles away. Live in light of that, and we might well weep.
But that is not where the Lord wants his people to be looking. Verse 19. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the fasts of the fourth month, and of the fast of the fifth, and the fast of the seventh, and the fast of the tenth.
What shall they be? Seasons of joy, and gladness, and cheerful feasts. Because there is only better things to come.
[32:43] Verse 23. Verse 23. More people shall yet come. People from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of God's people and say, Let us come with you.

Where you are going, can we please come too? The returned exiles heard this from Zechariah and likely had visions of the city they were sitting in.
Being restored to an even greater glory than it had been in the days of David and Solomon. That day never came. Not because the Lord of hosts was unable to keep his word.

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But because the Lord of hosts was speaking of a city altogether more glorious. At the very end of the Bible, we are given a picture of our future.
And in that picture, the apostle John sees, what does he see? The holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. Having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper clear as crystal.
[33:57] Not the earthly Jerusalem, but the heavenly city of God, whose beauty we cannot fully fathom. That is what God is building in us and through us.

That is what Zechariah is pointing us to. A truly restored city. Full of renewed people dwelling with their God in glory.
Not just for a small remnant from Babylon. But for people of every tribe, tongue and nation. To have this God as their God. To live with him in his heavenly city, glorious and radiant.
So he says to his people who are tempted to weep. Rejoice. Rejoice. It's not a season of sorrow. But gladness. Because thus says the Lord of hosts. So let us watch our hearts. Strengthen our hands.
[35:10] Love, truth and peace. And rejoice. In what the Lord is doing. And will do. Lift up your head.

If it has drooped after years of faithful service. If the progress isn't what you hoped. Don't look back. Don't look down. Look up and look forward.
There is something worth working for. Something worth rejoicing over. And that day will come. Because thus has said the Lord of hosts.
Let us pray now that we would strengthen our hands for the Lord's work. And rejoice in all that he has done. And will do for us. Father, we thank you and praise you.
For what you have said you will do. We thank you for what you have done for us in the Lord Jesus Christ. And Lord, as you build your church here on earth.
[36:17] We pray that you would help us. As part of it. To fix our eyes. On what is waiting for us in the future. Lord, help us to watch our hearts in that.

To not do things for ourselves. But to seek to do what is pleasing to you. Lord, not to do what we require. But what you require of us. Lord, help us to strengthen our hands.
To get to work. Lord, not to grieve or lament or be discouraged. By slow progress in our lives. In our sanctification. In our walk with you.
But to strengthen our hands. That we might persevere. In this day of small things. Knowing that you are doing great things. Help us to love what you love. And to hate what you hate. Help us to rejoice in what you are doing.
Knowing that there is a glorious heavenly city to come. That will one day descend in a new creation. Where you will be our God. And we will be your people forever and ever.
[37:23] Dwelling with you. Lord, help us to look forward to that day. Help us to live now in light of that day. And that we might in all things.

Do it for the name of Jesus Christ. In which we pray. Amen.

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