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THREE SHORT WEEKS

Thus saith the LORD of hosts; The fast of the fourth month, and the fast of the fifth, and the fast of the seventh, and the fast of the tenth, shall be to the house of Judah joy and gladness, and cheerful feasts; therefore love the truth and peace. (Zech 8:19)

The Jewish way of mourning sometimes includes fasting. The only fast mandated by the Law of Moses was the fast on the day of *Yom Kippur*. (Actually, the Law said to “afflict yourselves,” and the oral law interprets that to include a fast.) As can be seen from the passage above, within a few years of the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, there were already four fasts associated with these events. The fast of the seventh month is the fast of Gedalia, which falls two days after *Rosh HaShanah*. It commemorates the assassination of Gedalia, whom Nebuchadnezzar had appointed governor in Jerusalem. The fast of the tenth month is *Asara b'Teves*, or the fast on the 10th of Teves. It commemorates the day that the Babylonians first besieged Jerusalem. But it is the other two fasts mentioned from which we may draw some conclusions at this time.

The fast of the 17th of Tamuz commemorates the day that Nebuchadnezzar’s army first breached the walls of Jerusalem. It begins a mourning period known as the “three weeks.” Those three weeks end with the fast of *Tisha b’Av* (the 9th of Av), which was the date of the burning of the first Temple. (It also is the date of the destruction of the second Temple, sometimes called Herod’s Temple, in 70 AD.) The three weeks last from July 3 through July 24 this year (2007).

There are, of course, historical lessons to be learned from these fasts. There are also, no doubt, many spiritual lessons to be learned. This article will only concern itself with a couple.

Normally one might ask, why mourn over the first break in the walls? Isn’t it the actual destruction of the city and the Temple that is significant? The answer points up something many people forget. The beginning of something may be as important as the end. “A journey of a hundred miles begins with a single step.” The slide away from God is not often a plunge over a cliff but down a series of terraces. When it comes to sin, the first step is

often the hardest. It gets easier to go against your conscience as your conscience gradually gets seared. Perhaps if we mourn and fast for every sin when it first happens we won’t have to mourn for those who eventually appear to have left God entirely.

Three weeks. Less than a month. It is not a long time at all. Why, that is half the old “allow four to six weeks for delivery.” By the time you could get a secret decoder ring or Charles Atlas’ secrets to the new you (kids ask your grandparents what these things mean) you could have gone from a crack in your wall to the burning of the city. Yes, the sins of Judah began long before 17 Tamuz. But the time from the breaking of the wall to the burning of the city was quick. If the Little Dutch Boy had not stuck his finger in the dike right away, it would not be long before he was washed away. Once the Adversary gets a foothold in our lives, he wastes no time in making us totally his follower. It may only take three weeks.

Finally, destruction is more than worth mourning. Whether it be the destruction of a city, a congregation, a soul, we must mourn. That is because we are not alone. “Ask not for whom the bell tolls. It tolls for thee.” I am diminished by every soul that rejects God. The kingdom of God should mourn over every congregation that rejects God’s orthodoxy. Just as we mourn a beginning of destruction, so much more we mourn the finality of the destruction.

But there is good news. Zechariah was told that the fasts would become joy. Although all seems dark, and no hope appears, joy comes in the morning. God will not leave his people abandoned to despair. Zechariah says that to those who love truth and peace, joy comes in the mourning.

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PMES

It is not unusual for a congregation to see a man get up to lead a prayer and they know at least one phrase that he will probably use. Over a fifty year span I have heard so many men lead prayers that there are possibly a dozen that if you gave me a name I could give you a phrase he uses, or *vice versa*. It is not necessarily bad that these men repeat themselves, and in many cases they may not be fully aware of the tendency. In fact, in most cases the phrase is perfectly scriptural, and an appropriate sentiment. I know a man who frequently prays for people having problems, that God will bless them “physically, mentally, emotionally, and especially spiritually.” It is these four aspects that I want to look at in this article.

This man’s phrase is certainly scriptural. “And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.” (Deut 6:5) “Stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel.” (Php 1:27) We are made up of multiple aspects, both physical and spiritual. It is only right that God should be interested in all aspects of our being.

The physical

God is interested in our physical welfare. God’s word certainly concentrates on the spiritual aspects of our

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existence, because that is what lasts. Nevertheless, we spend much time, in our physical view of things, in this world and in this body. God made us physical beings, so he must provide for our physical natures.

One way he does this is the so-called laws of nature, or, as one friend puts it, “the laws of God in nature.” From the beginning God has provided for the man he created. That provision is not even dependent upon obedience. “He maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.” (Matt 5:45) God is going to provide the basic necessities of life, regardless, even, of whether we believe in him or not.

We often think that our spiritual side is what was purchased with the blood of Christ. Paul says otherwise.

What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's. (1 Cor 6:19-20)

The specific sin Paul was talking about in this passage was fornication. Many have abused this passage to include harmful substances that Paul clearly did not intend to include. The passage does emphasize, however, that God owns our physical bodies as well as our spiritual.

Some people argue that the dietary restrictions of the Law of Moses were for health reasons. It is true that many, though not all, of the forbidden animals were either carnivores or omnivores. Even so, some of the plant eaters were also unclean. It is true that some of the animals that were classified unclean were common carriers of disease; but some of the allowed ones were as well. One problem with arguing that these restrictions were for health reasons is that you put God in the position of saying that he was concerned about the physical health of Israel, but the rest of the world could die off for all he cared. That is just not true, as demonstrated by Jonah. The other problem is that God himself gave a reason for the dietary restrictions, and it was not because of physical health. “For I am the LORD your God: ye shall therefore set yourselves apart, and ye shall be holy; for I am holy.” (Lev 11:44) These restrictions were for spiritual, rather than physical, reasons. They were to set Israel apart from other nations, an observable separation rather than a health consideration.

That is not to say that God does not want us to be healthy. “For bodily exercise profits a few things: but godliness is profitable unto all things.” (1 Timothy 4:8) Paul recognized that physical health was good, but limited. We only have these bodies a short time, but while we do we should take care of them. Would you let your house fall apart around you just because you will only have it in this life?

Many rabbis say that when Deuteronomy 6 talks about worshipping God with your might, he is talking about your money. That may be. But that may be also too restrictive. We can worship with our use of our bodies as well.

The mental

God gave us a mind, and expects us to use it within our individual capabilities. There are some who cannot learn as much as others; however, they still learn what they can. The seeking of knowledge is universal in man. Even those affected by diseases that cause regression of mental capability still want to learn. In fact, it is the exercise of the mind that can slow the development of such diseases. (Therefore, work the logic problem in the May 2007 issue of Minutes With Messiah, and you may remain mentally sharp a little longer.)

God made a point of mentioning that the development of the child, Jesus, included the physical, the social, and the mental. “And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man.” (Luke 2:52)

Solomon was a great proponent of improving the mental aspect of man. The word “knowledge” appears forty-one times in the book of Proverbs. Frequently acquiring knowledge is equated with wisdom. “A wise man will hear, and will increase learning.” (Prov 1:5)

God gives us a mind, and the capability (perhaps responsibility) to use it. Even in Eden, God did not allow Adam to sit around doing nothing. Adam was to tend the garden, which meant some physical labor. But almost any good gardener will tell you that the physical labor is incidental to knowing how to tend the garden. Certainly every bad gardener will tell you that much physical labor is useless in keeping a garden going if you don't know what you are doing.

The emotional

How do we know that God is concerned with the emotional makeup of man? The church.

God could have told people to follow him, and then left them on their own. Instead he established an organization, or more properly an organism, for the emotional maintenance of his people. Granted, one of the important aspects of the life of a church is worship to God. However, God says that the church is more for the social or emotional welfare of its members.

What is our purpose in singing? It is partially praise to God. Paul says, however, that a primary purpose is the social/emotional well being of the church. “Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord.” (Eph 5:19) It is almost as if speaking to God is incidental to our speaking to each other.

What is our purpose in assembling together? It gives us an opportunity to give (1 Cor 16:1-2), and to share in prayer and the Lord's Supper (Acts 2:42). Just as important, if not more so, is the fellowship also mentioned in Acts 2:42. When the writer to the Hebrews admonished people not to forsake assembling together, his or her

purpose was not so that people could worship God. “And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another.” (Heb 10:24-25) The assembly of the church is primarily for the emotional health of the members.

The spiritual

Our relationship with God is, necessarily, primarily spiritual. “God is spirit, and they that worship him must worship in spirit and in truth.” (Jn 4:24) After all, we are in this body only a short time. We will spend eternity in a spiritual body (1 Cor 15). It is the spiritual that lasts. God must be concerned with the eternal, because that is his realm.

It always amazes me that people want God to come and set up a physical kingdom on earth. Even today, almost two millennia after Jesus said “my kingdom is not of this world,” (Jn 18:36) people want him to demote himself so that they can lower God to the physical level. Why not lift themselves to God's kingdom rather than

What is our purpose in assembling, in singing?
The primary purpose is the social/emotional. It is fellowship.

bring God down to their level? Maybe it is because we are physical, and find it hard to comprehend God. We want to see God, so we make images that we can worship. We can't comprehend a spiritual kingdom so we demand that he institute a physical one. It is hard to deal with God on his level, a spiritual level.

Maybe that is also why we keep asking, “is this a sin; is that a sin?” We want to quantify the physical aspects of following God. It is much easier than for a selfish being to understand love. It is much safer than for a vindictive being to understand mercy. It is much less complicated than for a temporal being to understand eternity.

Maybe that is why that one person often prays for people, “especially spiritually.” It is not particularly hard for us to understand when God deals with us on the physical, mental, or emotional level. It is really hard for us to live on a different plane. The spiritual is a dimension beyond our measurement. God wants us to expand our horizons mentally. How much more he wants us to expand them spiritually!

THE KING'S QUESTIONS

The following is my retelling of an old Irish tale. It barely qualifies to be told in this context, but does have an answer that may teach us something. Since I learned it in an Irish accent, I will try to tell it the same way in writing.

Once a mighty king came against a small kingdom in Ireland. He had thousands of troops and many waggons. Nae kingdom had been able to stand before him, and yet he had rarely fought a battle. When he came to a country he would propose three questions. If any man could answer his questions, he vowed to turn around and leave that country alone. If they refused to answer or to surrender, ainly then would he fight.

The king of this small land was verra afraid. He knew he had only a small army that could not stand up to this great king. There was a priest in one of his small villages sent to him not to fear. "Send the invader hier, and we will send him home." Now the priest, he knew he was not wise enow to answer the great king's questions, but he knew a peasant who was verra wise, and he trusted him to be able to save the kingdom.

So the great king came to the hamlet of the priest. The priest led him to a hut on the sayshore, where this wise auld man lived. The king's army set up camp on the strand, and the camp stretched for miles. You couldna see the fairthest reaches with an eagle's eye.

Comes the king in all his finery, with his generals beside him. On the ither side stood the puir king, the priest, and a ragamuffin auld man. The great king asked his first question. "How many countries have I conquered?"

Now the puir wise man thought a bit. He had not heard the history of this king. But he had an answer. "Ain mair country than before your last victory, and ain less than affer your next." This was not the answer the great king expected, but he had to allow that it was true. No matter; he had two more questions harder than that.

Then comes the second question. "How many waggons would it take to cart off all the sand on this sayshore?" Now the puir auld man had no knowledge of geometries, nor did he even know how far the shore truly stretched. But he thought a bit, and answered the king. "It would ainly take a single waggon." Seeing the great king start to smile, he added, "IF the waggon were big enough." Again the king had to admit the truth of the answer, a'tho it was nae what he expected.

Question three. "You see how large my army is. I have hundreds of suits of clothing more magnificent than what I now wear. I have gold mines, and tin mines beyond counting, and cattle on a thousand hills. How much am I worth?"

At that the puir auld wise man smiled. He turned to his priest and king and told them they no longer had to worry. The day was theirs and this king would nae langer bother them. Turning to the great king he replied, "Ye canna be worth mair than twenty-eight siller coins."

The great king puffed hissels' up and roared, "Twenty-eight silver coins? A mere pittance! How do you reckon that?"

The auld man had been walking into his house. In the doorway he turned around and said, "Why, that is easy to figure. Me Laird was betrayed for thirty paices o' siller, and he is of much more worth than ye."

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