

Tent Camping

Nehemiah 8:13-18

When Sharon and I were first married, we often went tent camping. On one extended driving trip out west, our destination was a family reunion near Colorado Springs and traveling home we reached the state of Nebraska. We were looking forward to visiting the next day one of the places where Sharon had lived growing up. We arrived at our stopping place for the night, North Platte, Nebraska, and we had time to tour one of the largest railroad changing yards in the nation. Thousands and thousands of trains. And then we made our way to the campgrounds where we had reservations, winding around a number of streets that took us to a point that we discovered was on the opposite side of the river across from that railroad changing station. As we pitched our tent and settled in for the night, we could feel the ground shake with the constant rumbling of the trains.

More excitement was to come. Shortly after midnight, I believe, we awoke to a ferocious midwestern thunderstorm, which poured out buckets and buckets of rain upon our helpless little tent. And the winds gave us the clear foreboding of a nearby tornado. After an hour or so of fighting to hold up our tent from the inside, each of us trying to hold two corners, the tent gave way, and we took shelter in a nearby structure. After only a couple hours sleep, we then got an early start on our sightseeing for the next day. That night we got a hotel suite. I don't think we have been tent camping since that trip.

In our text this afternoon, the Israelites all go camping. Not tent camping, exactly. But almost. They were to make booths, temporary shelters, tabernacles, and they were to live in them throughout the weeklong festival of booths. They were obeying the law!

v.14-15

This festival of the Jews, among all the others, was prescribed by the Lord. It was a matter of law, God's revealed will. And this was a great day in the life of Israel, for it was a day in which the people began again to obey. But before we study the particular provisions of the law, let's step back and examine the attitude of the people. Let's examine the indicators of the condition of their heart, particularly regarding the law. What was their,

I. ATTITUDE TOWARD THE LAW.

v.13

What are those indicators of their heart? They "were gathered to Ezra the scribe, in order to understand the words of the Law." There was, in them,

A. An eagerness to study the law.

It is a praiseworthy eagerness. Remember, on the first day of this seventh month, there was a holy convocation, a sacred assembly. And everyone gathered to hear the law read all day long. And Ezra was faithful teacher, translating and explaining what was being read. That was the subject of our study a few weeks ago. That first day of the feast of Tabernacles, which actually began on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, was a day of sabbath rest, which was our subject last week. Today we see more of their activities during the seven days of that Feast of Tabernacles. Particularly the reading of the law, this time to just the heads of the households. And the pattern would be that those men, the heads of their own homes, would go back to their own family and teach what they had learned.

What a marvelous lesson this must have been! What a praiseworthy attitude. They wanted to know what the law required of them! So they sat and listened to Ezra teach.

Too often today there seems to be little such eagerness in the church! There is little honor and exaltation given to the laws, with little interest or even tolerance for studying them and coming to understand all the intricacies of what those laws require. Such a study would almost immediately be labelled “legalistic.” After all, as the popular but wholly inadequate expression goes, “We’re not under law but under grace.”

Now, I agree with that statement, as it is given in the Bible!

Rom. 6:14 “For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.”

We are not under law, that is, under the slavery of sin as the law produces upon those who are unbelievers. Non-Christians are under law, under the dominion of sin, enslaved to sin and condemned by the law. Praise be to God, we are freed from that slavery. Freed from the slavery to sin!

And what are Paul’s next words, anticipating the very misunderstanding that is so common today?

Rom. 6:15 “What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means”

God forbid!

And how is sin defined?

1Jo 3:4 “Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness.”

Sin is defined, understand that, sin is defined by the law! As our catechism puts it so well, “Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God.” The Children’s Catechism speaks of sins of omission, not doing what the law commands, and sins of commission, doing what the law forbids. And the point is that sin is defined by the law. And being under grace, not law, does not free us to ignore the regulations of God’s holy law!

We are not saved by that law. We do not atone for our sins nor do we, in any slightest way whatsoever, propitiate God’s wrath or satisfy his justice. Jesus did that entirely, perfectly, once for all, as our substitute. But the regulations of God’s law remain as the revealed will of God for our lives as God’s redeemed people. So Jesus says explicitly,

Mat.5:17 “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”

Jesus brought an end to the curse of the law to the cross, and we are surely freed from that in Christ. He removed the oppression and the dominion of the law, so that it no longer provokes us to sin.

But God’s holy, perfect, glorious law remains.

Ps. 19:7 “The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; 8 the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes; 9 the fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; the rules of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether. 10 More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. 11 Moreover, by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.”

And so, the example of these men in Nehemiah 8 must be an example that we follow. An eagerness to understand the law. In terms of teaching and training, I have found no better tool to understanding that law, and all its glorious and delightfully sweet regulations that the Westminster Shorter and Larger Catechisms! So learn to love the law, to consider God’s precepts “more to be desired than gold” and “sweeter than honey and the honeycomb.” And be eager to study that law. More than that, though, follow this praiseworthy example of,

B. An eagerness to obey the law.

Knowledge, unapplied to daily living, is a terrible thing! For a true understanding of wisdom is simply the ability to live your daily lives in the light of proper knowledge.

These people were eager to obey! This was no ivory tower. This was no mere dry doctrinal study for the budding theologians of the camp. This was life!

v.14 “And they found written in the Law, which the LORD had commanded by Moses, that the children of Israel should dwell in booths during the feast of the seventh month, 15 and that they should announce and proclaim in all their cities and in Jerusalem, saying, “Go out to the mountain, and bring olive branches, branches of oil trees, myrtle branches, palm branches, and branches of leafy trees, to make booths, as it is written.”

When they read something in the law, they simply went out and did it! How refreshing! The law said, “have a festival of booths,” so they went out and built booths.

v.16

How absolutely refreshing! God said it. I believe it. I’ll do it! That’s biblical faith. An eagerness to obey the law, because that law is “more to be desired are they than gold.” Sweeter than honey! “In keeping them there is great reward.”

May we all be eager to understand and obey the law. For the glory of God, with thankful hearts for the salvation that is ours in Christ, with pure and sincere motives, and with the humility to seek after Christ when we come face to face with our sin.

So please be sure that in your own heart you can say with the Psalmist, “O how I love your law. It is my meditation all the day.” With that long introduction, which is really my first point today,

let’s look at the specific,

II. PROVISIONS OF THE LAW.

v.14

A. The people of God were to live in booths.

v.16

A brief history of this particular festival is found in,

Deut. 16:13 “You shall keep the Feast of Booths seven days, when you have gathered in the produce from your threshing floor and your winepress. 14 You shall rejoice in your feast, you and your son and your daughter, your male servant and your female servant, the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow who are within your towns. 15 For seven days you shall keep the feast to the Lord your God at the place that the Lord will choose, because the Lord your God will bless you in all your produce and in all the work of your hands, so that you will be altogether joyful..”

It was a national thanksgiving festival. A harvest festival. An opportunity to give thanks for the abundant harvest to the Lord of the harvest. And what was the purpose of the booths? Turn to,

Lev.23:39 “On the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the produce of the land, you shall celebrate the feast of the Lord seven days. On the first day shall be a solemn rest, and on the eighth day shall be a solemn rest. 40 And you shall take on the first day the fruit of splendid trees, branches of palm trees and boughs of leafy trees and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days. 41 You shall celebrate it as a feast to the Lord for seven days in the year. It is a statute forever throughout your generations; you shall celebrate it in the seventh month. 42 You shall dwell in booths for seven days. All native Israelites shall dwell in booths, 43 that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in

booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.” 44 Thus Moses declared to the people of Israel the appointed feasts of the Lord.”

Now, I have no difficulty in understanding that the ceremonial, sacrificial elements of Old Testament worship were instituted by God to prepare the way for Christ, to show through external ceremonies what Jesus would accomplish in spirit and in truth. They are the things which Hebrews 9:10 teaches are “deal only with food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation.”

But that doesn’t mean we should avoid this passage in our study, for this festival of booths does, in itself, teach us much about Christ. So after the day of atonement in the life of Old Testament Israel, nothing could be more appropriate than a festival of thanksgiving. A festival that causes the people to remember that God delivered them out of slavery in Egypt, by means of temporary homes, booths or tabernacles.

And it is not coincidence that the language used of Jesus’ life on earth is this same word, the word for booth or tabernacle. Jesus tabernacles among us. Or the more familiar translation,

John 1:14 “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

Jesus dwelt among us. He tabernacled among us. He lived in a booth among us, so that we might behold the glory of the Father who sent him. And what will be the glory of heaven? That tabernacle, that dwelling of God among man, will be made permanent and eternal.

Rev. 21:3 “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself

will be with them as their God.”

So, the OT people of God were instructed to live in booths for seven days, once a year, to remind them of their salvation from Egypt. But amazingly, they had not done so since the time of Joshua!

v.17

Secondly, really simply to review the sermon last week”, during this festival God prescribed and commanded that,

B. The people of God were to hold a sacred assembly.

v.18

Note that phrase, “according to the prescribed manner. “According to the rule.” “In accordance with the regulation.” Now, that is extremely important, for although this particular regulation was ceremonial in nature and passed away with the coming of the new order in Christ, still the principle remains. The sacred assemblies which we have, the holy convocations, the times prescribed for worship, when we enter the holy of holies of the temple of God, in spirit and in truth, must be conducted according to the prescribed manner.

For us, in the NT, that prescribed manner has been altered. No longer do we have animal sacrifices, for instance. But we are not free to do whatever we choose to do in services of corporate worship. We are not free to do anything as long as it isn’t forbidden. Instead, in services of worship, we are compelled to include as elements of that worship ONLY things that God has prescribed. We still are to worship God “according to the rule.”

In the NT, that means the reading and preaching of the word, singing, prayer, offerings, lawful oaths, and the sacraments. And

that's it! That's the provision of God's law for us today in our sacred assemblies.

We ought never to give in to the demands of our age for more man-centered entertainment-based activities that seem more exciting and appealing to many people today. We ought to commit ourselves to faithful worship. And that is a delightful thing. Notice the people's,

III. REACTION TO KEEPING THE LAW.

Was it dry and boring? Was it dull and old-fashioned? Hardly. There was,

A. Great rejoicing. v.17

These festivals were conducted with great joy! Listen to a reference to the passover under the righteous leadership of King Hezekiah, recorded in,

2 Chron. 30:23 "Then the whole assembly agreed together to keep the feast for another seven days. So they kept it for another seven days with gladness. 24 For Hezekiah king of Judah gave the assembly 1,000 bulls and 7,000 sheep for offerings, and the princes gave the assembly 1,000 bulls and 10,000 sheep. And the priests consecrated themselves in great numbers. 25 The whole assembly of Judah, and the priests and the Levites, and the whole assembly that came out of Israel, and the sojourners who came out of the land of Israel, and the sojourners who lived in Judah, rejoiced. 26 So there was great joy in Jerusalem, for since the time of Solomon the son of David king of Israel there had been nothing like this in Jerusalem. 27 Then the priests and the Levites arose and blessed the people, and their voice was heard, and their prayer came to his holy habitation in heaven."

Those words should describe our worship as well! As we offer to God the simple, old fashioned, prescribed sacrifices that we include in our worship. The call of our day is innovation and excitement, constant movement and titillating entertainment. But worship is most joyful, I believe, when you strip away those worldly trappings, and stand before the Lord God of heaven and earth as a worshipper, worshipping in spirit and in truth. We don't need bells and whistles to have joy. We don't need a dog and pony show, nor a three ringed circus. Instead, we need hearts that love God and want to worship him the way he tells us to worship him!

And remember where all of this joy came from? An eagerness to understand the law and an eagerness to obey the law! Indeed, the final reaction to keeping the law that I would speak of this evening is simply the,

B. Increasing desire to know more of the law.

Genuine, devoted, loving, and sincere law-keeping will provoke you to greater law-keeping! It did for the people of Israel here.

v.18

Every day the book of the law was read. For seven whole days. And they ended the whole thing with another great sabbath day and sacred assembly.

Godly law-keeping stimulates such godly desires to know and obey more. And carelessness, laziness, hypocrisy and self-righteousness all stifle those godly desires. And yet there is so much carelessness today! Spiritual carelessness. We simply do not give much attention to the care of our souls! And there is much laziness, preferring our own comfort and enjoyment and familiarity at the expense of godly obedience. So its my job as a

preacher to exhort, to stir you on to love and good deeds.

Indeed, in the sacred assembly of our church today, that should be a goal for each of you. That's we we do here together, even as so we read in,

Heb. 10:24 "And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 25 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."

Let me end with that great Psalm I have already mentioned, a Psalm we will sing in a few minutes. Let these words be the stimulus to delight in God's word and to delight yourself in the study of God's law.

Psalm 19:7 "The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; 8 the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart...10 More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. 11 Moreover, by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward."

May you learn to delight in God in that way!