

John 7-8: Jesus at the Feast of the Tabernacles

Pray-Father, we thank you for us being able to gather together tonight. For a lot of us here, we come here tonight and we're hurt, broken, frustrated and dealing with a lot of stuff in our lives. And we just want to give that to you, we want Jesus to take that stuff, thank you that Jesus takes that stuff Lord. I pray as we go through the passages tonight that you would illuminate our hearts and minds with your Word. I pray for openness as we unpack these things Jesus says. We love you Lord. We praying this in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

When I was in High School, I dated a girl in my church that I had grown up with. And what do they say about relationships you get into? You don't just date and marry someone, who else do you get into relationship with? That's right, their family.

And this girls family, they were nice. We're still friends today. They are dear people to me, and I love them very much.

But as I got to know them and all the good things about them and all the quirky things about them. I started to notice something about their family.

It started in their house. I looked at the coffee table and saw a Bible, and whenever I see a Bible I look at what version it is, and this particular Bible was KJV. Not a bad version by any means, a little clunky to read for the modern man, but good enough.

Then I looked over at a bible on the book shelf. It was KJV as well. Not a huge deal, we all have our preferred versions. But at this point I started to keep any eye out for every Bible in this family's possession, and you know what version it was...that's right KJV.

Still, not a huge deal, but I remember talking with the Mom one day about bible versions, and man, was that an interesting conversation.

We sat in their kitchen and I was told how all other Bible translations were blasphemous and wrought with errors and purposeful mistranslated, and that the only really true word of God was the King James Version.

And I remember going home that night and just sitting on the end of my bed, glassy eyed staring at the wall. I was in a daze. You see, this family, these people, were people I respected and loved and trusted, but as we talked about the King James Version, I couldn't help but feel like they had missed the point of God's word.

Hear this, I was like a 16 year old, scrawny kid, with no theological training under his belt, who didn't even know that there was a debate surrounding the KJV and other versions, but even I, even I knew something wasn't right with their conclusions.

So I read my 1st theological debate book by DA Carson called the KJV Debate. And I was immediately thrust into the world of Christians fighting with one-another about their beliefs.

Let's get to the brass tax here. What bothered me most as I learned and even what bothered me before I even really understood their position fully is that my girlfriends family seemed to be missing the forest for the trees. What I mean is they seemed to be focusing on the wrong thing.

Karl Barth, a famous theologian, describes what I saw in this family concerning the King James Version Bible as this:

It is the life of people who are headed on a long journey and along the way find a sign pointing them westward. The signpost is there to convey them to their destination, but instead they stop and create a life for themselves under its painted words. They build a civilization there, celebrating the signpost and telling stories of how they arrived at the marker. Rituals evolve and songs are written. Books are published and liturgies follow. A few travel on and return, confirming that the sign does indeed lead to the place promised. But the second and third

generations have built a life around the signpost and have forgotten the meaning of the journey. Their lore is built on stories of past travel, not on stories of arriving or on the prophetic call to get on with the journey themselves.

This is exactly what this family had done. It's like they were on the road to Jesus, and instead of continuing down that road they built this little community around the King James Version. Their world had ceased being about the Godhead and the kingdom, and had started to revolve around a specific version of the Bible.

The good news is that for this family, it took some time, but they packed up their little city they had built around the KJV sign post, and continued down the path towards Jesus.

So as work through the passage tonight, keep this illustration of missing the forest for the trees on the back burner, as we will revisit it tonight.

Last week John and Kelly looked at the Bread of Life talk and their big push was are religious traditions getting in the way of your relationship with Jesus. And there is going to be a lot of overlap between last weeks message and this weeks message.

This week were are looking at a really large swath of scripture, and it is where Jesus is at what is called the Feast of Tabernacles or Feast of Booths and he makes some really incredible statements about himself using the elements of the celebration as symbols pointing to him.

Now here's the deal, we can't really understand fully the things Jesus declares about himself in chapters 7 and 8 with out first talking about the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles.

So let's take a second to talk about that.

So Jesus is in Jerusalem at the Feast of Tabernacles.

Tabernacles was the third of three pilgrimage type feasts that had their roots in the agricultural cycles of Judaism.

The 1st was the celebration of Passover. Most of us have at least heard of Passover.

Passover was celebrated and recognized the beginning of the grain harvest in spring.

The 2nd celebration was Pentecost, which was only seven weeks after Passover, and this celebrated the end of the grain harvest.

The 3rd and last celebration was Tabernacles. And this celebration centered around the autumn harvest of tree and vine.

As fall descended on the land, the fall crops had to be protected, so the Israelites would build these temporary shelters in the fields.

Theologically it reminded the people of the temporary shelters that their descendants set up as they wandered in the desert after they were freed from Egypt.

The Feast of Tabernacles was observed for 7 days and celebrated with numerous sacrifices of bulls, rams, and lambs, and the entire week climaxed on Day Seven, when some really elaborate ceremonies and rituals were conducted.

But what was really interesting about Tabernacles is because it took place between September and October, the celebration coincided with the autumn equinox, when day and night are equal in length. Because of this, incorporated in the Feast of Tabernacles were rituals recognizing the 'dying of the light' and ceremonies of light to celebrate the passing of the season.

The last layer here is that fact that late autumn was generally a period of drought in Israel. Water levels were low. Rains hadn't been seen since spring. The hills and land were barren and parched.

Because of this, in the celebration of Tabernacles, they incorporated another set of symbols, depicting a praying for water to replenish the land, but this also served as a symbol to replenish the land spiritually as well.

So, this is the backdrop that is behind Jesus as he speaks and makes bold declarations about himself.

Now there are a ton of Verses here, so we are going to condense some of these verses and look at the high points here. Let's pick the Story, in Chapter 7:1-2:

After this Jesus went about in Galilee. He would not go about in Judea, because the Jews were seeking to kill him. ² Now the Jews' Feast of Booths was at hand.

Then Jesus is with his brothers and disciples, and they tell him he should go to Judea, but he doesn't, because he knows his time has not yet come. So in verse 10 it says:

¹⁰ But after his brothers had gone up to the feast, then he also went up, not publicly but in private. ¹¹ The Jews were looking for him at the feast, and saying, "Where is he?"

And then people start saying who they think Jesus is, and then Jesus at like day three and a half starts teaching.

And as he is teaching the pharisee's are questioning him. Some people are believing in Jesus, others aren't.

Then the pharisee's send people to arrest Jesus. So things are really starting to ramp up here.

And then we get to the last day of the Feast of the Tabernacles, and if you remember we said how long does the Feast last? That's right, 7 days.

And every day of the feast, there was a ceremony that would take place where a procession of priests would go out to a spring. There a priest would fill a golden pitcher full of water, and while this was happening a choir of people would be chanting Isaiah 12:3: "With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation."

The pitcher was then carried back to the temple followed by a procession of people. And the people would carry tree branches in their right hands, and citrus branches in their left hands, and as they proceeded to the temple the people would be singing out loud Psalms 113-118.

When the procession reached the temple, the priest with the golden pitcher would climb the altar steps and pour the water out onto the altar. And on the altar were bowls, and as they would pour the water in the bowls, it would fill the bowls but it would over flow. And as it was over flowing, the people around with the branches would lift them in the air and be shouting "give thanks to the lord".

This happened every single day. But on the last day of the feast, they would do this 7 times.

And they did this water ceremony for many reasons. It was a people pleasing with God for rain since it was the fall and there was drought. It was also a looking back at when God had provided water and life to his people. In the desert God brought water from a rock. The prophets Zechariah and Ezekiel had visions of rivers flowing from the temple. These things also looked forward to the messianic age, when the messiah would come, the Christ, and God's spirit would be poured out like water on the earth. Everything that is happening here is steeped in layers and layers of symbolism and meaning. It is just rich and ripe with meaning.

Now I want you to imagine, it's the last day of the celebration, and in full public view of all that are there taking part in this procession and water pouring ceremony. As seven processions are climbing the hill and stairs of the temple Jesus proclaims this in verse 37-38:

...“If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. ³⁸ Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’ ”

Jesus in the midst of all this ceremony that is all about looking to God for both physical and spiritual provision is declaring to the people that everything they are doing in that ceremony is pointing to Him.

“Come and Drink” he offers. Believe in the messiah and out of you will flow rivers of living water.

Jesus here is alluding to the prophets Ezekiel and Zechariah’s vision of water flowing from the temple, but he’s looking ahead as well to when God pours out his Spirit, the Holy Spirit on the church.

And as Jesus declares these things, people respond in verse 40:

⁴⁰ When they heard these words, some of the people said, “This really is the Prophet.” ⁴¹ Others said, “This is the Christ.” But some said, “Is the Christ to come from Galilee?”

So people are immediately starting to draw lines here of who they think Jesus is.

And as the day turns too night, the ceremonies turn from focusing on water, blessings, and provision, and start focusing on light.

Understand here that there were 4 large, like huge stands that held four large golden bowls, that could only be reached by ladders, and these bowls were filled with lamp oil, and they would use the undergarment clothes that had been worn by the priests, and they would dip these in the bowls, and use the clothes as wicks on the top of the stands. And they would light these lamps, and Choirs of Levites would sing hymns and carry torches.

Now remember, this is before electricity, so when it got dark at night, it was dark, short of lamps things like that. But these lamps were so

big, it was said that the light would pour out of the temple into Jerusalem.

So we've just had these water pouring ceremonies, and now you have this grand ceremony celebrating the autumn equinox and pointing back to a time when God led his people by a pillar of fire in the desert, there there are 16 lit oil bowls, and priests singing, and people just worshiping the Lord, and it is in the midst of this that Jesus says this in 8:12:

"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

Jesus stands beneath these 16 lit bowls and says that not only is he the light of Jerusalem, but that he is what? The light of the world!

Just as God led his people through the darkness of the desert by a pillar of light, Jesus is declaring, using the same imagery that he is the light guiding them through the darkness.

Like what an amazing scene here. You have the water pouring ceremony and now the lamp lighting ceremony, and Jesus is standing there telling the people, you see all these things, all these ceremonies, and these rituals, all these things you're doing, they're actually pointing to me. I am the fulfillment of these things.

And the response of the Pharisees and the people after Jesus says these things, gets down right hostile. The Pharisees in the following verses argue with Jesus, and tell him that his testimony is false because He's bearing witness about himself.

But as he is arguing with the Pharisees people are still believing in Jesus and turning away from the mindset that the Pharisees have and are looking to Jesus, the light of the world.

And then Jesus says in 8:31, as he's arguing with Pharisees he says:

³¹ ...“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

³³ They answered him, “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, ‘You will become free’?”

³⁴ Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵ The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. ³⁶ So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. ³⁷ I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you. ³⁸ I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father.”

And from here things degrade, because Jesus tells the pharisees that their Father is the Devil and then Jesus says in verse 58:

⁵⁸ Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.” ⁵⁹ So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.

Whose the only other being that you know of that has the title, “I AM?”

That’s right God.

Jesus is saying, I am God. and His audience knew it, because what does it say they did next?

They picked up stones to kill him.

And then Jesus hid himself.

So what does this all mean for us today. I mean we’ve read through this whole story, we’ve talked about all the symbolism, and looked

back and looked forward and we've seen within that symbolism and imagery the power behind Jesus' declarations about himself.

We have to decide where we stand on this stage in the gospel of John and this story.

Here's what I mean. Do we view ourselves as standing with Jesus as those who are persecuted, or is it more in line with reality that we stand with Jesus' opponents?

This is a lot harder question to answer.

At first glance, you might right off the cuff say, well of course, I am on the side of Jesus, and we are persecuted by the world, etc, etc, and so we start to process the application of the passage through that lens.

But pump the brakes on that for a second. Think about it. Jesus' opponents here are not the pagan world around him.

It is the religious authority, it is the spiritual experts who are from the most religious city in the Bible, the epicenter of judaism, Jerusalem, who militantly opposed to Jesus.

I mean think about it. The Pharisee's, the religious leaders, these are a lot like the Christian leaders and Pastors of our day, they are the defenders of the faith. I read this week this phrase calling them the "Custodians of Tradition".

These leaders where there to protect the rituals, the customs, all the things they did to get close to God and to cleanse themselves from sin. Like, they were supposed to be in lock step with God, but if they were in lock step with God, when Jesus rolled up on the scene, he would have been welcomed. They had their theology nailed down, tight, on point, but everything was wrong with their relationship with God. And we know this because of the way they reacted to the claims and teachings of Jesus.

And yet, there is this deep paradox here, that Jesus suffers not worldly persecution, but Jesus suffers religious persecution.

Jesus isn't standing in the middle of some pagan square declaring these things about himself, but Jesus is declaring these things to people who claim to follow God to people who are 'God's people'. A people who were deeply religious and deeply spiritual and who earnestly sought God, who earnestly looked forward the coming of the messiah, who fervently followed God, the scriptures, and worshiped regularly.

And Jesus enters this religious world, and he immediately divides the crowd. You had people that believed in Jesus, but you have many who were entrenched in their religious traditions, in their religious world, whose passion to be spiritual betrayed them, and it caused them to be blind and deaf to the message of Jesus.

As I studied and prayed and wrestled with this message this week, I read this and it really got me thinking. I want to read it for you:

The paradigm of the passage is then set: Jesus steps into a religiously devout environment and immediately splits his audience. Those who follow him become passionate believers. Those who stand opposed, who defend their traditions with zeal, suddenly become zealous opponents, enemies of God's work in the world. This passage warns the custodians of tradition that their defense of these spiritual habits and rituals may well be their undoing.

I want to read that last line again:

This passage warns the custodians of tradition that their defense of these spiritual habits and rituals may well be their undoing.

Here's what I am getting at. This is going to be a really hard question for us to think about and wrestle with, but here it goes:

If Jesus stepped into our century, if he walked into our church, if he picked up a religious symbol (as he did at the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles) and challenged the symbol's original meaning, would we cheer or would we fight?

Suddenly we might find ourselves defending *tradition* instead of Jesus. We might explain or argue with Jesus why we do it this way, or why we choose these songs or that hymn, or why we let this person serve or that person serve, or why we allow this to be said in a service but not this, why we allow these people into our church who talk, act and dress like this but not like this.

What I am trying to get across to you, is that spiritual blindness rooted in religious tradition is not something that is unique to Jesus' day and age. Spiritual blindness caused by religious activity, ritual, and tradition is alive and well in our lives.

Remember the story I told you earlier of my girlfriends family who were KJV only people. And I quoted Karl Barth for you. I want to quote that again:

It is the life of people who are headed on a long journey and along the way find a sign pointing them westward. The signpost is there to convey them to their destination, but instead they stop and create a life for themselves under its painted words. They build a civilization there, celebrating the signpost and telling stories of how they arrived at the marker. Rituals evolve and songs are written. Books are published and liturgies follow. A few travel on and return, confirming that the sign does indeed lead to the place promised. But the second and third generations have built a life around the signpost and have forgotten the meaning of the journey. Their lore is built on stories of past travel, not on stories of arriving or on the prophetic call to get on with the journey themselves.

Like how much does that describe the church today. How many of us, how many churches have built civilizations, have built tribes around things that ultimately don't matter. Like we're on this road,

journeying towards God, and we get stuck, because we stop, and miss the forest for the tree's, we focus on anything and everything other than Jesus. And then we start to divide, and form tribes, and build these little kingdoms around these petty little things.

Like we divide over the craziest stuff, like speaking or not speaking in tongues, or like women in or out ministry, or like literal 6 day creationism versus not literal 6 day creationism, or pre-millennial, post-millennial, a-milleneial....that's to many millennials.

We're so concerned over parsing out this and that, that we miss Jesus. We miss what God is doing.

I've used this illustration before, but it's so perfect, like now 2 months ago I was sitting next to a Christian man whom I respect and for all intensive purposes looked up to, and when the pastor stepped on the stage with jeans on, he got ticked. Like mad. He couldn't even take in the Word of God because of what this guy was wearing.

And I know that this is really easy for us hear and to laugh at this and say, "well that just sounds ridiculous, I'm not like this." But I am telling you, there are things that you and I do, and ways of religious thinking that you subscribe to, that are completely blinding us to the work of God in our lives and in others lives.

Stop fighting about the end times.

Stop fighting about gifts of the Spirit

Stop fighting over music in the church

Stop fighting over when Jesus is coming back

Stop fighting over which version to use

For goodness sakes, stop fighting and judging people for the types of clothes they wear in church and start following Jesus.

There are so many times that we miss the forest for the trees. We miss what God is doing in the world and in our lives, we miss how God is growing his kingdom right in front of us, but we're blind to it, because we're so entrenched in our traditions, that its like we have blinders on.

What in your christian religious experience is causing you to miss Jesus?

And that sounds like a really odd paradoxical question, but it's at the heart of tonights passages.

What is your christian life is causing you to miss out on Jesus?

I can't answer that for you.

Maybe it has to do with people who are younger that you in the church.

Maybe it has to do with older people in the church.

Maybe it has to do with this pet theology or that pet theology.

If you are brave enough to ask yourself, "What is your christian life is causing you to miss out on Jesus?", I can promise you this, God will point it out.

I recently had a 180 degree turn on a position I've held for years, and when I let God into that process he freed me of my blindness.

So I'll end with that question,

What in your christian religious experience is causing you to miss Jesus?

Don't be afraid of the answer. Ask God to open your eyes. He will free you!

Let's pray