

At the Feast of Booths

John 7:1-13

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Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, August 24, 2008

“My time has not yet come, but your time is always here. The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify about it that its works are evil” (Jn. 7:6-7).

If a reader of the Gospel of John wants to follow the full chronology of Jesus’ ministry, he needs to do so with the other Gospels in hand. John provides a great deal of information not found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but he also leaves out information provided in those Gospels. This means that there are sometimes considerable gaps in time between John’s accounts.

One of these gaps occurs between chapters six and seven. John 6 tells of Jesus’ miracle of feeding the five thousand and his subsequent teaching to the crowd. The occasion was the Passover feast, which occurred in the spring. In John 7 we move forward about six months, to the Feast of Booths, or Tabernacles, which took place in the fall.

The Jewish feasts are important to John’s Gospel, both for keeping time and for John’s message about Jesus. All of Jesus’ visits to Jerusalem are linked to the feasts. In John 2-3, Jesus was in Jerusalem for the Passover. He returned in John 5 for “a feast of the Jews.” The events of John 6 are linked to the Passover of the next year, and in John 7 Jesus returns to Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles, prior to his final return to Jerusalem and its fateful Passover.

It is helpful, then, to know something about the feasts. There were three great feasts at which all the Jewish people were to gather (Dt. 16:16). The Passover, in the spring, occurred during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. This marked the start of the barley harvest and remembered the exodus from Egypt and the blood of the lamb that

caused God's wrath to pass over (Dt. 16:1-8). The Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost, took place in the summer, seven weeks after Passover. Here, first-fruit offerings from the early summer wheat harvest were brought to the Lord (Dt. 16:9-12). The third great feast was the Feast of Booths, or Tabernacles, which marked the completion of the harvest season (Dt. 16:13-15).

Christians think of Passover as the chief feast, but for the Jews Tabernacles was the greatest. Leon Morris explains: "Tabernacles marked the successful completion of their labors. The harvest was in the barns; the people could relax and rejoice. It was *the* feast for an agriculture people."¹ Moreover, Tabernacles was an exciting festival. To recall their exodus sojourn, the people lived outside in booths made of sheaves. The residents of Jerusalem set up booths on their porches and visitors set up booths in the streets. It was a festive scene: a national camp-out. Tabernacles included vivid ceremonies, such as the water-pouring ritual at the temple that is highlighted in John 7 and the great festival of lights to which Jesus comes in John 8.

The Feast of Booths may have been a light-hearted time for most Jews, but not for Jesus in this last year of his ministry. John tells us, "The Jews were seeking to kill him" (Jn. 7:1). By "the Jews," John means the religious leaders. Their long, simmering opposition to Jesus had come to a boil and they now openly sought to take his life.

JESUS' UNBELIEVING BROTHERS

John 7 begins back in Galilee, with a conversation between Jesus and "his brothers." Some have argued that this must refer to cousins or other relatives, due to their unbiblical notions regarding the sanctity of both Mary and the idea of perpetual virginity. But the text is unambiguous in identifying Jesus' brothers: sons that Mary bore to her husband Joseph after the virgin birth of Christ. We read of Jesus' brothers in many places. Mark 3:31-35 tells of a visit from "his mother and his brothers." Matthew 13:55 names his brothers as James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas. Jesus was the oldest son, of course, since his mother conceived him as a virgin. Acts 1:14 lists Mary and Jesus' brothers as being among the early believers after the

¹ Leon Morris, *Reflections on the Gospel of John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1986), 253-254.

resurrection. James is believed to have become the leader of the Jerusalem church and the author of the New Testament Book of James, while the youngest son, Jude, wrote the Letter of Jude.

But midway through his last year of ministry, Jesus' brothers had not yet come to faith: "Not even his brothers believed in him" (Jn. 7:5). This is remarkable, given that they spent their entire lives in close proximity to Jesus Christ! If anything can prove the depravity of the human heart, it is this.

The brothers' unbelief comes through in the advice they offered – the kind of advice believers often endure from worldly family members. "His brothers said to him, 'Leave here and go to Judea, that your disciples also may see the works you are doing. For no one works in secret if he seeks to be known openly. If you do these things, show yourself to the world'" (Jn. 7:3-4).

Commentators vary in assigning motives to Jesus' brothers. Some think they were taunting or challenging Jesus; others think they were tempting him into a dangerous situation; others still view this as worldly encouragement for their super-religious family member. Whatever the motive, the worldliness of this advice is clear. If Jesus was determined to be a religious leader, he ought to advance his interests publicly. Theirs was the advice of Madison Avenue – where the advertising firms have their headquarters – the advice so often given to the church today. "Promote yourself! Go to where the action is and make a splash!" They thought that if Jesus wanted to impress the large crowds and encourage his supporters in Judea, he needed to display his miracle-working power at the Feast of Booths.

What are we to say about this advice? For one thing, it bears strong resemblance to the attitude of the crowd in John 6. The unbelieving crowd wanted worldly results; Jesus' unbelieving brothers advised worldly methods. In contrast, Jesus sought heavenly goals and he knew they could only be achieved by godly means.

This advice also reminds us of the counsel given to Jesus in the desert by Satan. Satan tried to tempt Jesus to use his divine power for self-serving ends without thought for obedience to God. Jesus answered Satan, "You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you

serve” (Mt. 4:10). Likewise, Jesus was not about to follow his unbelieving brothers’ advice.

This dialogue should comfort and instruct Christians in unbelieving families. J. C. Ryle notes that believers often “blame themselves because their families remain worldly and unbelieving. But let them look at the verse before us. In our Lord Jesus Christ there was no fault either in temper, word, or deed. Yet even Christ’s own ‘brethren did not believe in Him.’” Parents, as well, should not marvel if their children struggle in their walk with God. These were, after all, the sons of Mary and Joseph and the younger brothers of Jesus Christ. “Seeing Christ’s miracles, hearing Christ’s teaching, living in Christ’s own company, were not enough to make men believers. The mere possession of spiritual privileges never yet made any one a Christian.”²

Apart from his mother, Mary (his step-father Joseph seems no longer to have been alive), Jesus had no believers in his own family. So during this most challenging time he could not enjoy the spiritual fellowship of close family members, but had to endure their unspiritual advice. As his family headed south for Jerusalem in their festive caravan, Jesus was not able to fit in or take part. Always putting God first, he faithfully endured this burden that many of us know as well.

THE TIME FOR JESUS

If Jesus remained patient and cordial with his brothers, his reply to their advice was nonetheless pointed. “Jesus said to them, ‘My time has not yet come, but your time is always here’” (Jn. 7:6).

This reminds us of another occasion when Jesus replied similarly to his mother. Earlier, at the wedding feast of Cana, Mary advised Jesus to display his power publicly. Jesus answered her, “My hour has not yet come” (Jn. 2:4). What did Jesus mean by this?

For one thing, Jesus’ life followed a definite pattern and timing set by God’s eternal decree. Galatians 4:4 says of his birth, “When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son.” The same was

² J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), 2:2.

true for every event in Jesus' life. Mark Johnson states, "Just as God had a special time for Jesus' birth (Gal. 4:4) and a set time for his death (Jn. 17:1), so also God had a specific timetable for his life as a whole."³ This seems to be the meaning of Jesus' reply to Mary, in which he used the Greek word *hora*, which is translated as *hour*.

But when Jesus told his brothers, "My time has not yet come," he used the word *kairos*. This has a broader meaning, indicating the proper time or an opportune occasion. His brothers wanted Jesus to manifest himself publicly in glory, but he knew that it was not yet the right time or occasion for his exaltation.

This brings us back to Israel's great feasts. The Feast of Unleavened Bread launched the beginning of the harvest year. Its observance of Passover anticipated Christ's atoning death on the cross. While his brothers wanted Jesus to promote himself at the Feast of Booths, it was instead at Passover that he intended to be lifted up before men: not in glory but in the suffering of his cross.

The second great feast was Pentecost, which marked the first fruits of the harvest. It is noteworthy that even in the Old Testament, this feast began not on the last day of the week – Saturday – but the first day – Sunday (Lev. 23:23-25). It thus anticipated the resurrection age of the Christian Church. This feast symbolized the first-fruit of Jesus' resurrection, namely, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, which occurred at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-41). Here, the first fruits of the blood-bought, Spirit-indwelt Church were gathered before God.

The Feast of Tabernacles, or Booths, prefigured the completed harvest and pointed to the Second Coming of Christ. This is why Jesus refused to reveal himself publicly at this feast. Before the harvest of Tabernacles, there must first be the blood of Passover and the Pentecost age of the Spirit-empowered church. Only then, when the completed harvest has come in, Jesus will return in the glory of the Feast of Tabernacles.

Therefore, when Jesus' brothers advised him to display himself at the Feast of Booths, they were speaking of the glory that awaits his Second Coming. They were advising him to put on the crown

³ Mark Johnson, *Let's Study John* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2003), 109.

without first taking up the cross. St. Augustine wrote: “They were giving him counsel to pursue glory; as advising in a worldly manner and with an earthly disposition... This is what the Lord says in answer to those who were giving Him counsel of glory, ‘My time is not yet come; – the time of my glory is not yet come.’”⁴

How grateful we should be that Jesus ignored his brothers’ advice! Had Jesus taken up glory at Tabernacles – before the Passover cross – it would have meant condemnation for all the world. Arthur Pink writes, “Then there had been no atoning blood under which sinners might find shelter! Thankful must we ever be that He did not do what they asked.”⁵

Jesus concluded, “You go up to the feast. I am not going up to this feast, for my time has not yet fully come” (Jn. 7:8). When they left, “he remained in Galilee” (Jn. 7:9). But then, “after his brothers had gone up to the feast, then he also went up, not publicly but in private” (Jn. 7:10). Some people see a conflict between Jesus’ words and his actions. But John explains that Jesus was only unwilling to go to this feast openly in pursuit of glory. As a Jew it was his duty to appear in Jerusalem for this event. But he did not go up feasting, as one who has brought in the harvest; instead, he went up secretly, as the One who was preparing to bear his cross for the sins of the world.

There is a good lesson for us in the way Jesus avoided unnecessary danger. Many Christians struggle with the challenge of remaining faithful to God while prudently avoiding trouble. Jesus provides us with an example, fulfilling his duty to God by appearing at the Feast of Booths, but doing so unobtrusively so as to avoid the Jewish leaders who were seeking his life.

During the early days of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther appealed to this passage in reply to those who wanted him to confront the pope or emperor directly. People wanted a blazing, violent collision. Luther answered with Christ’s example: “Notice here that Christ gives danger a wide berth... Christ... did not want to expose himself to danger and tempt God until He felt obliged to go and His

⁴ Augustin, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 13 vols, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 7:180.

⁵ Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 375.

divine office demanded it.”⁶ Like Jesus, we must be faithful to God, fulfilling our duties even in the face of danger. But when obedience is not compromised, we should be prudent in avoiding trouble.

Like Jesus, Christians must also be aware of the times in which we live. Jesus did not seek prematurely to enjoy the glory symbolized by the Feast of Booths. His was the time of the Passover sacrifice. So what is our time? Ours is not the time of the Passover Feast – we are not called to make an atoning sacrifice, since Christ has shed his blood once for all. Our time is symbolized by the Feast of Pentecost – the time when the first-fruits have come in and the work of harvesting lies before us.

Jesus looked forward to his Second Coming in glory, but first there was the cross. We, too, look forward to his Tabernacles return. But first God has called us to the harvest fields. Now is a time for sweat and sacrifice. The time is short, the harvest is great, and the workers are few. As Jesus consecrated himself to the cross, let us be devoted to preaching the gospel, living holy lives before the world, and sharing the good news of salvation in every opportunity that God gives us.

JESUS AND THE PEOPLE

Jesus arrived in Jerusalem to find that everyone was looking for him. News of his Galilean exploits would have reached the city, and people were expecting him at the feast. The people were eager for excitement, and the religious leaders hoped for a chance to execute their murderous schemes.

Meanwhile, public opinion was divided: “There was much muttering about him among the people. While some said, ‘He is a good man,’ others said, ‘No, he is leading the people astray’” (Jn. 7:12). This is always the way of the world when it comes to Jesus, with every kind of opinion and attitude towards him. People love to debate and discuss, to argue fascinating questions of theology. The multitudes cast their eyes on Jesus; indeed, the world can hardly take its eyes off him. But how few pass from talking about Jesus to actually knowing him and believing on him for the salvation of their souls. As a whole,

⁶ Martin Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John, Chapters 6-8*, Luther's Works, v. 23 (St. Louis: CPH, 1957), 201, 205

the people in Jerusalem avoided any public displays of support for Jesus and “for fear of the Jews no one spoke openly of him” (Jn. 7:13).

Therefore, Jesus did not arrive to displays of his popularity. This reminds us that public popularity is no proof of orthodoxy. It was those who hated Jesus who held the seats of religious power and influence. Jesus once said, “Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets” (Lk. 6:26). This warns Christians who compromise in order to gain worldly popularity. Jesus told his unbelieving brothers, “Your time is always here” (Jn. 7:6). It is at the earthly feasts that worldly people may seek applause and pleasure, but the time for Jesus and his servants is yet to come.

Most troubling was the desire of the religious authorities to put Jesus to death. Why was Jesus considered such a threat? He explained it when speaking to his brothers: “The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify about it that its works are evil” (Jn. 7:6-7). This is the key to explain Jesus’ visit to the Feast of Booths and, indeed, the world’s hostility in every age. “This is the judgment,” Jesus had said: “the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil” (Jn. 3:19). If we think the world enjoys the holiness displayed by Jesus, we are wrong. Jesus condemns the world by his perfect example.

But it is especially Jesus’ teaching that incited hatred from the Jewish leaders, just as it drove off the crowds of John 6. William Barclay writes, “When a man’s ideals clash with those of Christ, either he must submit or he must seek to destroy him.”⁷ This is why so many people who reject Jesus today devote sermons, books, and films to blaspheming Jesus and denying his teaching.

Above all else, the world hates the cross of Christ. The cross condemns all worldly religion. A Messiah who came to die offends our pride by proclaiming the horror of our sin before God. This is why the Jewish leaders, like many people today, so hated Jesus: “Because I testify about it that its works are evil” (Jn. 7:7).

⁷ William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), I:236.

Christians will have the same experience that Jesus did. People have varied opinions of Christians, but in general there is rejection and opposition. Holy lives expose the evil of this world. And while God blesses our witness to many who believe, those who reject Jesus will hate his gospel most of all. Jesus explained: “If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” (Jn. 15:19). Just as Jesus declared, “My time has not yet come” (Jn. 7:6), now is also not the Christian’s time to live at ease in the world or seek its glory.

JESUS IN OUR TIME

What matters most is not the opinion of the world. What matters is what you think of Jesus Christ. Some people will agree that he is a good man – yet they do not come to him in faith. Others denounce Jesus as a deceiver, leading people astray in a fanatical religion. Most people fear to think for themselves about Jesus, lest they should be condemned by the spirit of our world.

What about you? Amidst all the earthly glory of the Feast of Tabernacles, Jesus remained hidden. He is hidden in the world today, but proclaimed openly through his gospel. Jesus calls you to come to him in faith: “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life,” he said; “whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him” (Jn. 3:36).

Lastly, if you are a believer, how do you think about the time in which you live? Do you act as if this was the time after the harvest, like those who reveled at the Feast of Booths? Does your lifestyle say that now is your time? Does your use of talents, money, and time indicate that your heart is bound to this present, passing, sinful age? Like the people in Jerusalem, are you unwilling to speak openly for Jesus for fear of the world? Jesus calls you to understand the times in which you live. He took up the cross. Will you take up the gospel so that many will be saved?