

God in the Wilderness

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[0:00] Well, good morning, church. If you have a Bible, turn with me to John chapter 7. Last week, Pastor Matt mentioned that the chapters in John were getting longer and longer, so today we've decided to do two chapters instead of one.

So I won't read every word, but we will cover the main themes of these two chapters, John 7 and 8, that focus on Jesus teaching at the Feast of Tabernacles.

Let's pray as we prepare to look into God's Word. Father God, thank you for the gift of your Word. Thank you for those who have preserved it over the years, who have copied it for 2,000 years now, who have translated it into our language, who have printed it, broadcasted it online that we can read it and access it so easily.

Lord, we take this for granted so many times, and yet we thank you. We thank you for this wonderful gift, for the precious gift of your Word, and Lord, for your Holy Spirit. We pray that your Holy Spirit would help us as we read your Word this morning, as we seek to take its message to heart.

Lord, would you be transforming us and drawing us to yourself through it? We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. So this past winter, I've spent a handful of afternoons hiking on the north end of West Rock.

[1:27] I don't know if you've been up there. It's only about a 20-minute drive from downtown New Haven, but it's about as quiet and secluded as you can find within that radius, especially when the ground is frozen and the trees are bare.

And this winter, I've found the windswept ridge, the snow-covered trails, and the large boulders to be a helpful place to think and pray, to reflect and process.

On the one hand, the environment feels harsh, unaccommodating, unsuited to my desires for comfort and ease. The trees are barren, the wind is cold, the ground seems lifeless.

I wouldn't want to be out there alone at night. But in the midst of the wilderness, there are still signs of God's presence and God's providence. The trees lift their branches toward the heavens, silently acknowledging their creator.

The sun sheds bright light on the rocky paths, unhindered by leaves. A herd of deer, strong and determined, advance quickly across their path.

[2:33] Brooks gurgle with fresh water underneath the snow, and recently the crocuses have begun to emerge, and the trees have begun to bud. I've been reminded on my hikes this winter that God is present in the wilderness, both literally and figuratively.

For many of us, this past year has had its share of harshness, coldness, barrenness, aloneness, but in the midst of the wilderness, God is there. Sustaining us, sustaining us often in ways we can't initially see underneath the surface, and calling us to deeper levels of trust and dependence on Him.

And this theme of God's presence in the wilderness stands behind these two chapters that we're looking at this morning. John 7 and 8 focus on Jesus' teachings at the Feast of Tabernacles, or the ESV translates it, the Feast of Booths.

Verse 2 says the Jewish Feast of Booths was at hand. Verse 10, Jesus went up to the feast. Verse 14, He started teaching in the temple in the middle of the feast. And verse 37, Jesus speaks on the final day at the climax of the feast.

Now, what was this Feast of Booths or Tabernacles about? Well, it was all about God's presence with His people in the wilderness. It looked back to the time after the children of Israel had left Egypt, and after they had received God's law at Mount Sinai, and during their long sojourn, their 40-year-long journey through the wilderness.

[4:01] It was looking back to God's provision for them throughout those long years. And so everybody camped out for a whole week in tabernacles or booths.

That is, makeshift structures of branches and leaves reenacting how they had lived in temporary shelters throughout their sojourn in the wilderness.

In the Jewish calendar, there were actually three annual feasts that brought large numbers of pilgrims to come to Jerusalem. In fact, all the heads of households were supposed to come to Jerusalem, according to the Old Testament law, three times a year.

So in the spring, it was the Passover feast, which celebrated the exodus from Egypt. In the early summer, it was Pentecost, which looked back, among other things, to the giving of the law. And then in the fall was the Feast of Tabernacles, which was the largest, the most popular feast, and the most joyful feast, which also came at the harvest time after the grapes and olives and fruit had been harvested.

So there was all kinds of things to eat. It was a very joyful season. There was music and dancing, feasting and laughter that lasted late into the night.

[5:11] So it wasn't looking back on the wilderness only in sort of a somber way, but looking back in a joyful way at how God had met them and cared for them and walked with them and brought them through. And what we'll see in these chapters is that Jesus claims to be the fulfillment or the embodiment of all that the Feast of Tabernacles represented.

Of all that it celebrated, Jesus was the reality. And so Jesus claims to be God himself present with his people in the wilderness.

Now, these two chapters, if you look at these two chapters of John, they've got a lot of back and forth dialogue. And it's basically three groups of people. Jesus, number one. Number two, the religious leaders, who are sometimes called the Pharisees or sometimes simply called the Jews, but that refers particularly to the religious leaders of the time and also the people who are sometimes referred to as the crowds, sort of who are not in official positions of religious leadership, but who have their own opinions as well.

So there's a lot of back and forth between these three groups of people, but I want to focus our attention on three key claims that Jesus makes about himself. And of course, each of these claims sort of provokes a response, a response from the other parties.

But the first claim Jesus makes is in verse 37 to 39 of chapter 7, where he claims to be water from the rock. The second claim is in chapter 8, verse 12, where he claims to be light for the path.

[6:39] And the third claim is in chapter 8, verse 31, where he claims to be freedom from bondage. So water from the rock, light for the path, and freedom from bondage. We'll see how all of these three things were part of what they were celebrating during the Feast of Tabernacles, and how Jesus claims to be the fulfillment of those things.

And then we'll also consider, as we look at the response, various responses from Jesus here, we'll consider our own response to each of those claims. So first, starting in John chapter 7, verse 37, Jesus claims to be water from the rock.

Now, some of you might say, well, how can you preach on a chapter and skip 36 verses? This is what happens in the first 36 verses of chapter 7. Well, very briefly, the tension builds.

Verse 1 to 9, Jesus and his brothers are discussing, is he going up to the feast or not? And why is he going up? Or why is he not going up? They have that discussion. Verse 10, Jesus goes, not with them, but privately.

Verse 11 and 12, we see that there's already some conflicting assumptions or opinions about who Jesus is. So verse 12, some people said he's a good man. One, others said he's leading the people astray.

[7:48] So even before Jesus says anything, we see that there are some divided verdicts out there or divided initial opinions. Verse 14 to 24, Jesus challenges his hearers to basically sincerely seek the truth about who he is.

Verse 24, he says, don't just judge by appearances, but make a right judgment. And he's really challenging them to make a right judgment about who he is and who he claims to be.

Verse 25 to 36, we see again the divided response of the people. Verse 30, someone who arrest him. Verse 31, but many of the people believed in him. So the tension is building.

And finally, in verse 37, we see Jesus' first explicit, direct claim about who he is. Verse 37, on the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, if anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink.

Whoever believes in me, as the scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water. Now this he said about the spirit whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the spirit had not been given because Jesus was not yet glorified.

[9:00] Now what does this have to do with the feast of tabernacles? Well, when the people of Israel were journeying through the wilderness, you can find in Exodus 17 and Numbers 20, they got thirsty and God provided for them water from a rock.

And every year they celebrated God's provision of water in the wilderness during the feast of tabernacles. In fact, they had a ceremony every day which specifically focused on this gift of God.

So every day, and seven times on the seventh day, the last great day of the feast, a priest would fill a golden pitcher with water from the spring in Jerusalem, and a choir would sing the words that we heard read earlier from Isaiah 12, with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.

And then the priest would process with the golden pitcher of water up to the temple, followed by a huge crowd. It was sort of a huge parade that happened every day of this feast.

People would be waving palm branches, singing psalms, trumpets would sound, and when they got to the temple, the priest would pour out the water on the altar, and the people would sing and rejoice.

[10:09] And you know, it wasn't just a celebration looking back to how God had provided water in the past. It was also looking forward to what God had promised to do in the future. Because if you read the Old Testament prophets, they don't only look back to God's provision of water from the rock.

They also look forward to a day when God would pour out his life-giving spirit like streams in the desert. Ezekiel and Zechariah prophesied that one day a stream of living water would flow out from the temple in Jerusalem into the whole world, bringing life.

And so the Feast of Tabernacles was looking forward to that future promise of the Holy Spirit being poured out and the life of God spreading throughout the world.

And so when Jesus stood up on that last and greatest day of the feast, look at what he's saying. He's saying that time has come that the prophets have foretold.

I'm the rock from which the life-giving water flows. And the water will flow not just in Jerusalem, but into all the world. That life-giving water is the Spirit of God, which everyone who believes in me will receive.

[11:29] He's saying, I'm the fulfillment, the embodiment of all that you're celebrating and all that you're longing for at this feast. Now, verses 40 to 52, we see that once again, the people's response is divided.

Both the people and the leaders are divided. Some of the people say he's the prophet. Some say he's the Messiah. Others say he was neither. The chief priests and Pharisees want to arrest him, but the officers are impressed by how he spoke.

And Nicodemus pipes up and said, at least give him a hearing and learn what he does before you render your verdict. In other words, the response is inconclusive. The jury is still out.

But before we go on to Jesus' second claim, let's consider the invitation that Jesus gives us and how we're responding to that. Look at the invitation in verse 37. Jesus says, if you're thirsty, come to me and drink.

Now, Jesus gave a very similar invitation last week. Pastor Matt communicated that. But it's worth saying it again. If you're longing for more than what this world can give, have you come to Jesus and tasted what he has to offer?

[12:41] If you're dissatisfied with yourself, if you find yourself anxiously striving but still feeling empty and unresolved inside, have you come to Jesus and asked him to fill you?

Or if you find yourself gravitating towards unhealthy attachments, feeding on things that aren't good for your soul, overindulging in things that don't ultimately satisfy, have you responded to Jesus' invitation to come to him and drink of the water of life?

That's what Jesus promises here. He speaks into the wilderness of this world, into the wilderness of our souls, and he offers something far more satisfying, the water of life. Now, that brings us to Jesus' second major claim, chapter 8, verse 12.

Now, I'm going to pass over the story in 753 to 811. As probably most Bibles note, the earliest manuscripts don't include these verses. But if you're wondering where that story came from and what we should do with it, I wrote a little article that was included in the weekly email this week that answers some of those textual criticism questions.

It gets a little technical, but feel free to read that if you would like to dig into that. But for now, I'm just going to pass on to Jesus' second major claim in chapter 8, verse 12, where he says, again, Jesus spoke to them saying, I am the light of the world.

[14:10] Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. Now, again, you might ask, how does this claim of Jesus to be the light, how does that connect to the Feast of Tabernacles?

Well, again, Exodus 13 tells how the Israelites, when God led them through the wilderness, how did he lead them? With a pillar of fire, with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

Right? He provided light for the path. And once again, this particular provision of God was dramatically reenacted and celebrated during the Feast of Tabernacles every year.

So here's what they did. In the courtyard of the temple, they would set up four massive oil lamps. A tradition from the Jewish Mishnah says they were 75 feet tall, supported by a network of ladders and sort of pillars.

They were basically massive pillars with huge golden bowls on top, which would be filled with gallons and gallons of oil. They would use old clothing for massive wicks.

[15:12] And every evening, these oil lamps would be set ablaze and kept burning all through the night. Now, the temple is at the highest point of the city of Jerusalem.

And so when it got dark, the light from the temple would shed its glow over the whole city. And people would sing and dance in the temple all through the night. The Feast of Tabernacles was, there was an all-night party every night in the temple, celebrating God's provision of light.

And again, they weren't just looking back on how God led the people of Israel through the wilderness with the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. They were also anticipating what God had promised to do in the future.

Because again, the Old Testament prophets look forward to a day when the light would triumph over the darkness once and for all. Isaiah 49, God said to the people of Israel, I will make you a light for the nations that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.

Or Zechariah 14 has an interesting prophecy. It spoke of a day when the Lord would be king over all the earth. And it describes that day as a unique day when living water would flow out from Jerusalem.

[16 : 26] Again, that water theme. And then it also says when evening comes, there will be light. It won't be morning and evening like usual. The light will continue.

And so when Jesus stood in those very temple courts, verse 20 says that's where he was, where those big lamps were set up, where those big lamps were set ablaze every night.

And Jesus said, I'm the light of the world. If you follow me, you won't walk in the darkness, but will have the light of life. He's saying, I'm the fulfillment of all that you're celebrating here.

I'm the true light blazing for all the world to see. Now, once again, look at the people's responses. And it's again, divided.

Verse 13, the Pharisees immediately respond negatively. They begin contradicting Jesus, cross-examining Jesus. But then in verse 30, it says that many believed in him.

[17 : 25] So again, it's a divided response. And so again, it challenges us to consider how are we responding? What is Jesus inviting us to? And how are we responding to his invitation? What's the invitation?

Jesus says, whoever follows me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the light of life. He's not only inviting us to come to him, but to follow him. To let his light, the light of his teaching and his word and his presence guide our path through this world.

You know, think about it. Every other week of the year, if you were walking around Jerusalem at night, you'd be walking in the darkness. But during the Feast of Tabernacles, when those lights were burning in the temple, the whole city would look different.

The glow would be visible even from far away. And Jesus is saying to us, I am the light that will make your whole world look different.

And just as God guided the Israelites through the wilderness with a pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night, I'm here to guide and walk with you through the wilderness of this world.

[18 : 40] No matter how dark the world may get, no matter how dark your own heart may be, I am here to shine light upon your path. So the challenge is, are we walking in the light of Jesus?

Are we letting his word and his teaching guide us? Instead of trying to just blaze our own trail and figure it all out on our own. Are we looking to him as the light of life?

So Jesus claims to be water from the rock. He claims to be light for the path. And third, starting in verse 31, Jesus claims to bring freedom from bondage.

Verse 31, Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples. And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

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? Jesus answered them, Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.

[19:53] The slave does not remain in the house forever. The son remains forever. So if the son sets you free, you will be free indeed. Now once again, you might ask, How is this claim to be freedom from bondage?

How is that connected to the Feast of Tabernacles? Well again, the feast was all about celebrating freedom. God had set the children of Israel free from bondage in Egypt. He had given them his law so they would continue in that freedom.

So that they would be a distinctive people devoted to loving God above all else and loving their neighbors as themselves. And God brought them into the promised land where they were enjoying his abundant blessings.

But of course, over the long history of Israel, the people had repeatedly failed to continue living in that freedom that God had purchased for them.

They turned back to idols, which always enslave. They took advantage of one another, even to the point of actually enslaving one another, which was one of the specific things that God said they were not allowed to do.

[21:07] They defiled the land. And eventually God gave them into the hands of their enemies. They were sent into exile. And their freedom was never fully restored.

But again, the prophets looked forward to a day when God would bring a greater liberation, a greater redemption. When he would set them free in a deeper and more lasting way than ever before.

When he would wipe away their sins and establish his kingdom among them. And so when Jesus stands during the Feast of Tabernacles and says, if the Son sets you free, you'll be free indeed.

He's saying, I'm here as your true liberator. I'm the one who can set you free from bondage to sin, the deepest and most difficult kind of bondage to be released from.

I can set you free from the tyranny of sin truly and forever. I'm the Son who has the authority to give you a permanent place in God's family.

[22:17] I'm the fulfillment of all that you're celebrating and longing and hoping for in this feast. Now when we look at people's response to Jesus after his third claim, the response is actually no longer divided.

It is simply hostile. The leaders, in particular, we don't hear from the people anymore, but the leaders are offended by the idea that Jesus has come to set them free because that implies that they're currently in some kind of spiritual bondage.

And so the disagreement intensifies throughout the rest of the chapter until finally in verse 59 the religious leaders pick up stones to throw at him. In other words, they have arrived at their verdict that Jesus was guilty of blasphemy and deserving of death.

Now in all the responses of the people and the leaders to Jesus' words throughout these two chapters, there's one thing that's abundantly clear. No one can simply remain neutral about Jesus.

See, every successive claim that Jesus makes pushes people in one direction or the other. People either draw closer to him, come to him, follow him, stay with him, listen to him more carefully, find him more attractive and life-giving and precious than ever before, or they move further and further away from him, becoming even more hardened and obstinate and hostile in their rejection of him and their refusal to take his words to heart.

[24 : 02] No one can stay comfortably in the middle. And this is still true today. Every word of Jesus that we encounter and also every season of our lives that God in his providence brings us into pushes us to go in one direction or the other.

Either to draw nearer to Jesus or to distance ourselves and go further away. You see, the religious leaders were offended by the idea that they were in a state of spiritual bondage.

And, you know, they're not the only ones who are offended by this idea. The idea that we are sinners who desperately need a Savior is offensive to every human being's pride. I mean, how many of us naturally respond gladly and with gratitude if someone says to us, you are deeply flawed and sinful and you really need a lot of help?

None of us naturally respond well to a statement like that. But it's only by acknowledging that deep down we are sinners that we can know the security of Jesus' forgiveness and love for us deep down.

And it's only by continuing to acknowledge specific ways that we fall short, specific idols that our hearts are still prone to attach ourselves to, that we can enjoy an ever-increasing freedom from those particular sins and weaknesses that have plagued us in the past.

[25 : 43] You see, the invitation Jesus gives in this third section is not just to come to Him initially, not just to believe in Him for the very first time, but to abide in His Word.

And that word abide means stay or continue or remain. Jesus is calling us to stay with Him through good times and through bad times, when His words comfort us and when His words challenge us.

But as we abide with Him, His promise is that we will experience an ever-increasing freedom, an ever-increasing knowledge of the truth that sets us free.

As you reflect back on this past year, what direction has it pushed you in? Has it hardened your heart?

Or has it made you more loving? Have you pushed Jesus to the side or withdrawn from Him? Or do you cling to Him more tightly than ever before?

[26 : 52] Jesus is God, present with us in the wilderness. He's the water from the rock. Come to Him and drink.

He's the light for our path. Follow Him where He leads. And He's freedom from bondage. So abide.

Stay with Him. Continue in His Word. And you will have an ever-increasing knowledge of the truth that sets us free. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we praise You.

We praise You for Your amazing grace and power. We praise You for meeting us in the wilderness of this world and of our lives.

We thank You that You are all that we need. the water of life, light for our path, freedom from bondage to sin.

[28 : 12] Lord, we pray that we would experience You more deeply in each of these ways. We pray that if we have distanced ourselves from You or pushed You to the edges of our lives that we would turn back to You.

that we would come to You and drink, that we would follow You and know the light of life, that we would abide in You as Your Word abides in us.

Jesus, may we know You as the fulfillment of all our deepest longings, the fulfillment of all that the Feast of Tabernacles celebrated.

the all-sufficient Savior. Amen.