

Living in the Tent – Con[TENT]ment

2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

Introduction

This past weekend, Memorial Day, is recognized as the official start of summer – and with that the official start of the summer camping season. With the lifting of most of the COVID restrictions and the nearly universal ignoring of the rest, this Memorial Day turned out to be one of the largest travel days ever. People were tired of being cooped up. They wanted to GO somewhere. And for many, that “somewhere” was a campground.

- Never mind the weather turned chilly. If you are a real camper, you just put on another sweatshirt and move your bag chair closer to the campfire.

The timing of our Epistle lesson with the beginning of the camping season was just a big too intriguing for me to pass up. Perhaps you too noticed this verse read to you a few moments ago:

For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. (2 Corinthians 5:1)

With those words I begin a three part sermon series that I have titled “Living in the Tent.” All three of these sermons will be based in this section of Paul's second letter to church at Corinth. Each of the themes of these sermons will contain the word “tent” in it. For example:

- Next week the theme to be developed will be the proper **in[TENT]ION** of our lives as follower of Jesus Christ.
- The week following, it will be about living that life **consis[TENT]ly**.
- But today we begin with the theme of **con[TENT]ment**.

As you read the Scriptures you soon discover that tents are an important part of the biblical story of faith.

- When the children of Israel were freed from captivity in Egypt, they lived in tents throughout their time in the wilderness, a time that was extended to 40 years because of their disobedience.
- Even after they crossed the Jordan River into the Promised Land, the Israelites continued to live in these same tents because they had to conquer the land before they could build more permanent homes.
- That reality applied to the people. It also applied to God. Even the ark of the covenant – that reminder that God dwelled in their midst – was housed in a tent up to the time of King Solomon.

So important are tents to their history that in the days of Jesus – and even today – the Jews annually observed a weeklong festival, known as *Sukkot* which means “Feast of the Booths.” This happened every fall and it was a required festival. You had to do it. The event requires every Jew to live in a tent-like structure to remind them of what God had done for them.

No person would ever associate a “tent” with the city of Corinth. It was a wealthy city and people who placed great value on power, money, knowledge and social standing. They had little regard for Jesus Christ. Instead they worshipped Aphrodite, goddess of free love and pleasure. As a result, they were also a very promiscuous culture.

Of all the cities in the Bible, many scholars think the current culture of America most closely resembles the culture of Ancient Corinth. And to a community of believers trying to live out the Christian faith in midst of the Corinthian culture that pushes them in every opposite direction, the Apostle Paul says:

Therefore we do not lose heart. (2 Corinthians 4:16)

In another passage he frames it like this:

I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength. (Philippians 4:11-13)

Hang in there. Stay true to your faith. You may not totally fit in with the culture around you, and that is just fine. Don't lose heart! Be content whatever your circumstances might be. And then he tells us the secret for finding contentment like that. The secret, he says, is found in where you look:

... fix our eyes ... (2 Corinthians 4:18)

#1: FIX YOUR EYES ON WHAT GOD IS DOING

Look at verse 17:

For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. (2 Corinthians 4:17)

A major part of contentment is being able to look at your situation and see what God is doing in it. Or, at least being willing to try to see what God is doing. Contented people see God. Contented people look for God. People who lack contentment only see their problems.

- Paul says, “Stop looking at your problems. Start looking at Jesus.” Fix your eyes on Him.
- And when you do, those once insurmountable problems become merely light and momentary ... not because they are less huge or less problematic, but because you can begin to see God at work in you and in the problem. You begin to see what God sees.

That truth is perfectly illustrated by one of my favorite Old Testament stories. You can read it all in 2 Kings 6. The king of Aram was angry at the prophet Elisha, so in the middle of the night he and his army surrounded Elisha's house. An entire army sent to capture one old man.

- In the morning Elisha's servant went outside to get the paper. He saw the army surrounding them, and he panicked. This servant has only one line in this whole story. It is a classic:

Oh no, lord! What shall we do? (2 Kings 6:15)

- Elisha, on the other hand, is perfectly calm and content. He responds to his servant like this:

Don't be afraid. There are more us than there are of them. (2 Kings 6:16)

- When the servant began to look for God, he discovered that God's army had surrounded the army of Aram. And his big problem suddenly became light and momentary.

When your eyes are fixed on Jesus, problems cease to be problems. They become tools through which God can and does work.

- In the midst of what we might call problems, God teaches us faith, and hope, and patience, and courage, and perseverance. He teaches how to rely on His strength rather than our own.
- And when all that is happening in us, the people around us see it too. And God moves in their lives too.
- In the Elisha story, God used that so-called problem to capture the entire army of Aram with a single loss of life. But before the servant could understand that, he first had to see God.

Because the secret, Paul says, is found in where you look:

So we fix our eyes ... (2 Corinthians 4:18)

And then he goes on to say:

#2: FIX YOUR EYES ON WHAT MATTERS THE MOST

I call your attention to verse 18:

So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. (2 Corinthians 4:18, 5:1)

Dwight Moody was traveling by boat on one of the Great Lakes in route to an evangelistic service at which he was to be the preacher. During the trip a really bad

storm developed, so band in fact, that the other passengers on the boat cowered in fear, certain they were all going to die. They even started an impromptu prayer meeting, asking God to deliver them safely from the storm. Moody did not join in this prayer meeting. When asked why not, he answered with these words, "I have one sister in Chicago and one in heaven. I don't care which one I visit tonight. Either one will be a blessing."

Dietrich Bonhoffer, the great German theologian, stood before a firing squad during World War II for speaking out against Nazism, "This may seem to be the end for me, but it really is just the beginning."

Both of these men knew what mattered most: The eternal, not the temporary. By contrast, Voltaire was one of history's best known atheists. He often stated that "by the time I'm buried, the Bible will be non-existent." He died in 1778. By the end of his life, his physical condition and his attitudes were such that no one wanted to be around him. On his death bed, his last words were: "I have been abandoned by God and man; I shall now die and go to hell alone."

Moody and Bonhoffer both understood heaven was waiting for them, and that was all that really mattered. To use an imagery of Jesus, they were storing up treasures in heaven. Here is how Jesus said it:

Don't keep hoarding for yourselves earthly treasures that can be stolen by thieves. Material wealth eventually rusts, decays, and loses its value. Instead, stockpile heavenly treasures for yourselves that cannot be stolen and will never rust, decay, or lose their value. For your heart will always pursue what you esteem as your treasure. (Matthew 6:19-21)

Everything about you – your life, your possessions, your relationships, your body – everything is temporary. It's only a tent. We weren't designed to stay here on earth forever. All of who we are and all that we have is temporary

- Now, I'm in no rush to get to heaven, but if it happens anytime soon, I'm okay with that too.

It took time to get to that point, though. To return to a verses I cited earlier:

I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation,
(Philippians 4:12)

It was a lesson that had to be learned. But I have learned that if I want to know true and lasting contentment in my life, I need to fix my eyes on the things that really matter.

APPLICATION

The words to this hymn have been around for more than half a century, but the song is so good contemporary artists continue to release it. I listened to a Lauren Daigle version

while I was prepping this sermon. The words and tune were originally created by Helen Lemmel:

Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in His wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,
In the light of His glory and grace.

As you fix your eyes on Him, you will find contentment for your life.

Amen.