

D. After the Feast of Tabernacles – Jesus and the Adulterous Woman (7:53-8:11)

Based on John's account, this incident seems to have occurred on the day following the "last, great day" of the Feast of Booths (cf. 7:53-8:2 with 7:37). If the "great day" was indeed the climactic seventh day, then this encounter took place on the eighth-day sabbath which concluded the feast. Alternatively, it occurred on the day following that sabbath observance. Either way, John situated the episode in close proximity to the Feast of Booths, indicating that he intended his readers to read and interpret it in the light of that feast and its symbolic and prophetic significance. More narrowly, the incident needs to be read in light of Jesus' ardent call which brought the feast to its climax: This individual – though a woman and an adulteress – was also the proper object of His invitation; if she thirsted, she needed only to come to Him and quench her thirst everlastingly with the living water which He alone can – and does – give.

1. The first thing to note about this passage is that it is almost certainly a later addition to John's text. It isn't included in the most important early Greek manuscripts and isn't mentioned by any of the Church fathers prior to the fourth century. (Ambrose and Augustine referred to it and Jerome included it in his Latin Vulgate.) The passage doesn't begin to appear in the standard Greek text in the Eastern Church until the tenth century and the earliest known reference to it by a Greek (Eastern) Church father was by Euthymius Zigabenus in the twelfth century. It is also notable that the passage occurs in different locations in John's account in the manuscripts which include it. Bruce Metzger comments: "*Most copyists apparently thought that it would interrupt John's narrative least if it were inserted after 7:52. Others placed it after 7:36 or after 21:25. Significantly enough, in many of the witnesses that contain the passage it is marked with asterisks or obeli, indicating that, though the scribes included the account, they were aware that it lacked satisfactory credentials.*" (A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament)

The most common explanation given by those seeking to legitimize the passage as canonical is that it was removed from early manuscripts by church authorities concerned that it seemed to reflect badly on Jesus by presenting Him as soft on adultery. So they worried that it would have a negative effect on wives (in particular), leading them to conclude that they could commit adultery free of divine judgment. However, over time the Spirit allegedly moved copyists to restore it to the text of John's gospel, first in the Western Church and then later in the East. Others (particularly those of the KJV and Textus Receptus persuasion) have argued that the passage's canonicity is proven by the sheer number of manuscripts – albeit predominately late manuscripts – which contain it.

Despite such arguments, it's virtually certain that this context wasn't part of the original text. *This doesn't, however, imply that the account is non-historical.* The fact that John didn't choose to include it doesn't mean it never happened. John himself stated that he constructed a carefully crafted thematic account of Jesus of Nazareth and that his design determined the material he included. Apparently John felt that this incident, like so many things Jesus did and said, wasn't crucial to making his case (ref. again 20:30-31). Indeed, many scholars affirm that this account has all the marks of historical authenticity, and the fact that it eventually found its way into John's gospel indicates that it was part of the early Church's oral tradition concerning Jesus' life and ministry.

2. Regarding the incident itself, the writer introduced it by noting that “everyone returned to his home” (7:53). This is an explicit indication that the feast had come to an end, for otherwise the worshippers would still be staying in their temporary booths in and around Jerusalem. According to the account, Jesus also left the city and crossed the Kidron Valley to the Mount of Olives to the east, returning to Jerusalem and the temple the next morning. As He’d done during the feast, Jesus again began teaching the people, only to be interrupted by a contingent of Pharisees and scribes dragging a woman in tow (8:3).

Somehow this woman had been caught in the act of adultery and her crime reported to the Jewish authorities. Aware that Jesus was teaching in the temple, these scribes and Pharisees brought her to Him in order to get Him to make a public pronouncement regarding her. They wanted to hear from Him, but not because they respected His judgment. Neither were they concerned with justice – either for the woman or for the sake of the Law. Rather, they saw in her and her crime an opportunity: She was merely a pawn in a shrewd conspiracy to trap Jesus and discredit Him in the eyes of the people.

- a. These men’s agenda was evident from the outset as they addressed Jesus with the title *teacher* (rabbi). This is the only time in John’s gospel that Jesus’ adversaries referred to Him this way (cf. 1:38, 3:2, 20:16) and they did so out of guile. Israel’s elite reserved this title for those who satisfied their criteria of training, scholarship and allegiance. Jesus didn’t meet this standard (ref. 7:15), but more importantly, His teaching and ministrations didn’t accord with their own. They’d never have ascribed the title of rabbi to Him and did so here only as part of their pretence in seeking His judgment concerning this woman. The truth was they had no interest in what He thought; *they* were the rabbis and He was unqualified to join His judgment to theirs. Guile and malice alone motivated their solicitation.
- b. Marching in and setting this woman in the midst of the assembly, these leaders announced to Jesus that she had been caught in the very act of adultery (8:4). John didn’t elaborate further, but this description is important in that her accusers were indicating that the requirement of witnesses had been met and therefore her guilt was established (ref. Deuteronomy 19:15). It wasn’t necessary to investigate the matter; the only thing to be decided was her fate. And the Law was clear in that regard: She was to be put to death (8:5; cf. Leviticus 20:10).

From the vantage point of these Pharisees and scribes, the entire matter had been settled. They weren’t coming to Jesus to litigate the case, but to hear His opinion of the sentence they had imposed. But their inquiry was completely disingenuous; they weren’t interested in Jesus’ rabbinical insight into the Law, but wanted to set Him against the Law – and so against *Moses* (ref. again v. 5) – in the sight of the people (8:6a). If they could achieve this, they’d strip Him of His followers.

- c. Rather than answering their question, Jesus stooped down and began writing in the dirt with His finger. Here the speculations run wild, yet there’s no way to know what Jesus wrote. What is clear is that the accusers weren’t moved; they saw Jesus as only avoiding their challenge and so continued to press Him (8:7a).

These authorities demanded an answer and so Jesus rose again to His feet and said to them, “*He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her*” (8:7). They had come to Jesus expecting to trap Him by forcing Him to side either with the woman or Moses. Of course, they had no such conundrum: They were committed disciples of Moses (ref. 9:24-29) and he was emphatic that adulterers were to be executed. But they discerned a more complex dynamic at work with Jesus; His teaching and ministry in Israel emphasized compassion, mercy and forgiveness and they believed that, if He sided with Moses, the people would view Him as duplicitous, if not hypocritical. On the other hand, if He adhered to His pattern of compassion and mercy He’d show Himself an adversary of Moses and the Law and then they’d have grounds to formally accuse Him.

Jesus responded, not by avoiding their challenge, but by speaking to the reality underlying it. They insisted that He side with Moses and the Law (and so Yahweh) or this adulteress; He sided with the *truth*, exposing the cynical and hypocritical designs which motivated them. They weren’t inflamed by zeal for God and righteous indignation at adultery, but by hatred for a man they wished to destroy. This woman was merely a pawn in their conspiracy against Him; *their seeming affront at sin was really only a front for the sin which filled their hearts.*

- d. After giving His one-sentence answer, Jesus again stooped down to write on the ground (8:8), leaving His hearers stunned. He was silent and apparently so were they. After a few minutes in the awkward silence, the crowd slowly began to disperse (8:9). Jesus’ words completely defused the situation such that the chaos of accusation and confrontation was replaced by silence, contemplation and withdrawal. John recorded that the elders in the group were the first to leave, and the fact that the men with the most maturity and discernment responded first underscores the poignant wisdom of Jesus’ answer. Even the instigators – the Pharisees and scribes who were recognized authorities on the Law – were silenced. It’s unclear whether they were convicted of their own unrighteous motives (as indicated by some readings in the Textus Receptus tradition and reflected in the KJV) or simply realized that Jesus had gotten the best of them and they weren’t going to be able to succeed in their design. Either way, they released the woman and followed the others out of the temple.

Scholars continue to speculate about what Jesus might have written, but John’s silence in this regard suggests that the important issue here was His *act* of writing and not what He wrote (or drew). It was His actions, and not writing in the dirt, which spoke to His audience. In that regard, historians have noted that this was a common practice in the ancient Near East when a person wished to demonstrate his unwillingness to engage in a matter at hand (hence the woman’s accusers continuing to press Jesus for an answer). If this was indeed Jesus’ intent, then the first time He stooped down to write He was conveying that He wasn’t going to be party to what was obviously a cynical and malicious charade; the second time He was indicating that the matter was closed and He had nothing more to say. He had passed judgment as they asked Him to, though clearly not as they expected.

- e. Within a few minutes the woman found herself alone with Jesus. She undoubtedly felt just as uncomfortable in the awkward silence as those who'd departed, and now her discomfort was amplified as she stood there before Jesus alone, exposed, humiliated and ashamed. His charge, though addressed to her accusers, pertained to her and she must have been agonizing over what this remarkable man, stooped over in front of her and writing in the dirt, was now going to say or do to her.

When all had departed, Jesus rose to His feet and turned to the woman, exhorting her, by means of two pointed questions, to understand what had just transpired: "*Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?*" Only minutes earlier she'd been dragged into the temple by an angry group of men intent on seeing her stoned to death; now she was standing there alone with Jesus with all of her accusers gone (8:10). Somehow this man had defused the situation in a moment, leaving her astonished, humbled and grateful. It's unclear whether her address to Him should be rendered *sir* or *lord* (v. 11), but either way, it speaks to the respect and honor she wished to express. Jesus had delivered her from her accusers, but that didn't eradicate her guilt; she remained worthy of Yahweh's condemnation. Would Jesus, then, condemn her? No, He joined her accusers in not condemning her – *not because He had sin like them, but because He'd forgiven hers*. By His pronouncement Jesus was indicating His authority to act on Yahweh's behalf, both in condemning men and forgiving them (cf. Mark 2:1-11; Luke 7:36-50).

Remarkably, with only a handful of words Jesus was able to wade through the confusion of the moment, expose the agenda of the woman's accusers and give His answer to her fate. He spoke light to darkness and truth to error and deception. His words sent sinful men away judged in their unrighteousness and a sinful woman away freed from condemnation. This dynamic has perplexed commentators and ethicists through the centuries; indeed the difficulty of the passage has been used to explain its absence from early manuscripts. To some it appears that Jesus was snubbing the law by refusing to condemn an adulteress. Others note what seems to be an inconsistent standard on Jesus' part: "I don't condemn you *this time*, but don't do this again." Still others struggle with the idea that only those without sin can pass judgment on others; if this is the case, who can fulfill the obligation to judge (ref. 1 Corinthians 5)? Some, recognizing that this context wasn't part of the original text, choose simply to ignore it altogether (Lenski, et al.). But treated within the context of the gospel truths the four evangelists labored to convey, much of the difficulty disappears. *The issue at hand is the meaning and effect of Christ's coming (note again the proximity to the Feast of Booths), not questions concerning law and moral judgment.*

Repeatedly the gospel writers emphasize that Jesus forgives sin because He is Yahweh come into the world to reconcile and restore all things. He forgives, not because He *overlooks*, but because He *redeems* – by His incarnation as well as His death. Being the Last Adam – man in truth, Jesus' mere presence that day spoke to the "good news" that the time had come for God to fulfill His purpose for the world. He could grant forgiveness because of who He was (Yahweh returned to Zion) and what His presence signified (Yahweh's "day" of judgment bringing deliverance and restoration). Jesus' words and actions that day testified that, in Him, Yahweh's new-creational kingdom was dawning. And new creation means *no condemnation*, but also *newness of life* because, in every respect, this creational paradigm is "in Christ" (cf. 8:11; Romans 6:1ff, 8:1ff).