

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver St.
Flagstaff, AZ 86001
www.fcfonline.org

THE JOY OF OBEDIENCE

2 Chronicles 30

By

Steven J. Cole

October 30, 1994

Copyright, 1994

October 30, 1994
Kings of Judah Lesson 11

The Joy Of Obedience 2 Chronicles 30

Pretend that you're on the old TV game show "Password." You'll recall that the object of that show was to try to get your partner to say the "password" by a process of word association. For example, if the password was "read," maybe you would say "book." Your partner responds, "magazine." You say, "newspaper." He gets the connection and says "read."

Your word that you want your partner to guess is "obedience." What words would you use to get him to say "obedience"? "Duty." "Rules." "Regulations." "Laws." "Restrictions."

I venture to say that one word you would *not* use is "joy." Joy and obedience don't seem to fit together. Joy seems liberating; obedience sounds restrictive. Joy conveys lightheartedness; obedience sounds burdensome and heavy. Most of us would never think that the way to true joy in life lies on the path of obedience to God.

And yet it is so. King Hezekiah's story reveals that . . .

Obedience from the heart to our gracious
God results in great joy.

As we saw last week, Hezekiah was a godly king who in the first year of his reign resolved to restore personal and national worship as the top priority. He cleansed and restored the temple and reinstated the sacrifices. In chapter 30 we learn how Hezekiah invited the whole nation to observe the Passover in Jerusalem. The result was the greatest worship celebration since the division of the kingdom (30:26).

The theme of heartfelt, joyful obedience occurs repeatedly throughout the chapter, as not only Judah, but also many in Israel join together to celebrate the Passover. Verse 12 sums it up: "The hand of God was also on Judah to give them one heart to do what the king and the princes commanded by the word of the Lord." The mood of the convocation was "great joy" (30:21, 23, 25, 26). They had such a great time that they decided to extend it an extra

week (30:23). They didn't want it to end. Though some mocked and refused to come (30:10), those who obeyed knew the deep and lasting joy only God can give.

If we want that kind of joy, we need to imitate that kind of obedience. I want to share five observations about obedience from the heart:

1. Obedience from the heart is founded on God's Word.

King Hezekiah didn't get a brilliant idea out of the blue to celebrate the Passover. He was simply obeying what God commanded through Moses as a statute for Israel (Exod. 12:14; see 2 Chron. 30:5 ["prescribed"]; 12 ["the word of the Lord"]; 16 ["according to the law of Moses the man of God"]; 18 ["prescribed"]). And, when Hezekiah decided to celebrate the feast on the second month instead of the first (30:2-4), he wasn't making that up; it was permitted in the Law of Moses (Num. 9:9-10). As we saw in the previous chapter, Hezekiah's reforms were founded on a return to God's Word as the standard for how to live. All revivals are centered on a return to God's Word.

The Passover feast was instituted historically at the culmination of the plagues which God brought on Pharaoh and Egypt when he refused to free Israel. On the night designated by God, the people were to kill an unblemished male lamb and smear its blood on the two doorposts and on the lintel of their homes. Then they roasted the lamb and ate it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. On that night God passed through the land of Egypt and killed all the firstborn men and beasts in homes not covered by the blood, but "passed over" those with the blood.

The Passover is a beautiful picture of the redemption that God would provide through the Messiah. Christ is our Passover lamb (1 Cor. 5:7); every person under the shed blood of Christ will be spared from God's judgment. The deliverance from slavery in Egypt that the Passover commemorated is a type of the deliverance Christ provides from bondage to sin. The Passover was followed by the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread that typified the life of holiness required by God's people.

It wasn't easy for the Jews to obey God's command regarding the Passover. In fact, it was a major hassle! The man had to take

off from his job or leave his fields. The wife had to pack up clothes and food for the whole family. (Those of you who go camping with small children know what that's like!) They didn't have cars or paved highways, so they had to walk and ride on donkeys to Jerusalem where the feast was celebrated. All of that hassle just to observe a ceremony that God said was to be a memorial of their deliverance from Egypt.

Obedience to God's Word is not always convenient or easy. It's much easier to sack in on Sunday mornings than it is to get up and get the family ready for church. It's easier not to spend time daily with the Lord than it is to set aside that time to meet with Him. It's often easier to fudge on the truth than to be honest. It's easier to spend your money as you please than to be faithful as a manager of God's resources. It's easier to yield to sexual temptation than to be pure. It's easier to go along with the crowd than to stand alone because of your convictions. You often pay a price to obey God.

Obedience to God's Word is not always popular (30:10). Some of the people in the northern kingdom said, "You've got to be kidding! You want us to go to all that hassle to go to Jerusalem just to observe some outdated ritual prescribed in the law of Moses?" So they laughed them to scorn and mocked them. It's ironic that the northern kingdom was on the brink of extinction, yet these men would not turn in repentance to the Lord! It reminds me of Lot's sons-in-law who thought he was joking when he appealed to them to flee the destruction of Sodom (Gen. 19:14). But it's the same today: even though people apart from Christ are on the brink of perishing, they will laugh you to scorn when you take a stand for Christ and experience any kind of hardship because of your obedience. You can expect it! But, remember, the reason you go through the hassle or hardship of obedience is because God's Word is your authority for all of life.

2. Obedience from the heart responds to God's character.

Notice how God is referred to in this chapter: In 30:1 & 5, He is called "the God of Israel"; in 30:6, He is "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel"; in 30:7, 19, & 22 He is "the Lord God of their fathers." Each of these terms underscores the fact that God is a

covenant-keeping God, faithful to His promises even when His people have been rebellious. The letter of invitation (30:6-9) blends both the *holiness* of God who judges sin (“a horror” [30:7]; “His burning anger” [30:8]) with His *compassion* and willingness to be reconciled if His people would return to Him. The response of the people in destroying all the idolatrous altars (30:14) shows the only proper response to a holy God, namely, wholehearted obedience.

My point is that the character of God, while awesome in holiness, is also beautiful in grace and compassion. When you see that God righteously could send you to hell because of your many sins, but that He graciously extends a full pardon through the cross of Christ if you will turn from your sins to trust in Him, the beauty of His holiness and grace draws your heart to Him.

God made us so that we respond to beauty. Why do over four million people a year come from every corner of the globe to the Grand Canyon? Because they are attracted by its beauty. And when we see how beautiful God is in His grace and compassion to receive us to Himself in spite of our sin, it attracts our hearts to obey Him. As the Apostle Paul puts it, “the kindness of God leads you to repentance” (Rom. 2:4).

Thus, obedience from the heart is founded on God’s Word; it responds to God’s character.

3. Obedience from the heart yields to God’s person.

By this I mean that obedience is not merely conformity to a set of rules, although God’s commands need to be obeyed. But our obedience ought to be a heart response to a personal God. Note the repetition of “to the Lord” (30:2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9). The emphasis isn’t so much on “come, observe the Passover” in minute detail as it is rather “return to the Lord” (30:6), “yield to the Lord” (30:8), and “serve the Lord” (30:8). It’s a personal appeal.

Some who came to observe the Passover were not able to purify themselves ceremonially as the Law required (30:17-18). Hezekiah prayed for them and God “healed” them, that is, forgave their ceremonial uncleanness. The point is not that God is sloppy about sin, but rather that He looks on the heart (30:19, “prepares his heart to seek God”). Jesus rebuked the Pharisees because they outwardly obeyed, but their hearts were far from Him (Matt. 12:1-

7; 15:8; 23:23). The proper balance is to remember that God's grace never means license to be sloppy about sin; but His grace does mean that He blesses those who do not deserve it. The chief motivation for obedience is that the personal God has called me to Himself. Obedience from the heart responds to God in a personal way because of His grace.

Obedience from the heart is founded on God's Word; it responds to God's character; it yields to God's person.

4. Obedience from the heart promotes unity among God's people.

The northern and southern kingdoms had been divided for over 200 years. During the reign of Hezekiah's father, Ahaz, the northern army had killed 120,000 soldiers from the south. At the present time the Northern Kingdom was either on the verge of defeat by Assyria or had just been defeated, depending on when the events of this chapter are dated. It would have been understandable if Hezekiah had said, "Let them stew in their own juice. I'm not going to invite those guys to the Passover!"

But when you love God, you can't turn your back on God's people. It's significant that Hezekiah named his heir to the throne Manasseh, after one of the northern tribes! Hezekiah was burdened that his brothers to the north come back to God. It's significant that he did *not* say, "Come, and worship God however you conceive Him to be! Bring your idols to our Passover celebration!" He appealed to them to repent (30:6-9); but he also appealed to them to come. Some may have accused him of simply trying to extend his power base to the north. But I believe Hezekiah's true motive was to call all of God's covenant people back to Him.

I often hear of Christians who get wounded by other Christians and drop out of the church. They say that they worship God at home; they don't need the church. But invariably they not only drop out of church; they end up drifting away from God. Christ is the Head of His church, and He's not a severed Head! He's organically joined to His body. It would be silly if I said to you, "I like your head, but I can't stand your body!" You and your body are one! I've got to accept or reject the whole package! It's the same with Christ and His church.

I'll promise that you *will* be hurt by someone in the church, maybe by a whole group of Christians! Someone described the church as being like Noah's ark: If it weren't for the storm on the outside, you couldn't stand the stench on the inside! But if you love God and want to obey Him from the heart, you've got to work at being reconciled with your brothers and sisters in Christ. Quite often (as in our text) that reconciliation can't take place unless there is repentance (often on both sides). But like Hezekiah, you shouldn't hold a grudge against those who have wronged you, but should seek to bring any fallen brothers back to the Lord and to promote unity in Christ's body, the church.

Obedience from the heart is founded on God's Word; it responds to God's character; it yields to God's person; it promotes unity among God's people.

5. Obedience from the heart results in the joy of God's blessing.

These people enjoyed the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread so much that they extended it for an extra week (30:23; see also 21, 25, 26)! You know there's revival when people say, "We don't want such a short service; let's extend the worship and the preaching!" Verse 26 sums it up: "There was great joy in Jerusalem, ..." Note also verse 27: "Then the Levitical priests arose and blessed the people; and their voice was heard and their prayer came to His holy dwelling place, to heaven." This means that God fulfilled the priests' blessing on the people. They had great joy that the world doesn't know--joy that comes from obedience to our gracious God.

Conclusion

Maybe you've always associated obedience with oppression. You've thought that obedience means a loss of freedom and fun. That's the devil's lie. Obedience from the heart to our gracious God results in great joy. As the Apostle John put it, "For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3).

Sheldon Vanauken wrote this parable or allegory called, "The Day of the Rabbit" (source unknown); it may help you see why obedience to God brings joy:

Gypsy, a furry, wheat-colored collie, found herself in possession of several hundred acres of hills and woods, full of good things like rabbit trails and streams and intriguing burrows, and she delighted in it all. She was given a comfortable bed and good meals. Perhaps she rather took it all for granted. Of obligations there were few, and they not heavy. She was, to be sure, supposed to worship her Master and be right joyous with him. She knew she must not chase the chickens. While she must obey certain commands--to follow, to come, to lie down--there were no unreasonable ones, and no tricks. After all, to obey and to worship were natural to her dog nature.

Then came a day when, as Gypsy was prowling on the far hill past the springhouse and pasture, two things happened at once; the Master called her and a rabbit fled across the hill. Gypsy wheeled and raced towards the Master, as she had always done. Then she stopped. It entered her mind that she didn't have to obey. Perhaps the Master didn't understand about that rabbit. Anyhow, these were her hills. The rabbit was hers, too. Very likely it was all lies--that story of everything, including herself, belonging to the Master. How did she know that the food in her dish came from him?--probably there was some natural explanation. She was a free dog and that was the end of it. These thoughts went through her mind swiftly while she stood irresolute. Again came the Master's command; the rabbit crossed the hilltop. Gypsy whirled and raced after the rabbit. She had made a choice. She was free to choose.

Hours later she came home. She saw the Master waiting for her, but she did not rush gladly to him, leaping and frisking, as she had always done. Something new came into her demeanor: guilt. She crept up to him like a snake on her belly. Undoubtedly she was penitent at the moment. But she had a new knowledge--the knowledge of the possibility of sin--and it was a thrill in her heart and a salt taste in her mouth. Nevertheless, she was very obedient the next day and the day after. Eventually, though, there was a another rabbit--and she did not even hesitate. Soon it was the mere possibility of a rabbit. And then she dropped the rabbit thing altogether and went her way.

The Master loved her still but trusted her no longer. In time she lived in a pen and went for walks with a rope round her neck. All her real freedom was gone. But the Master gave her, from time to time, new chances to obey of her own free will. Had she chosen to obey she would once again have had perfect freedom to wander her hundreds of acres. But she did not return to obedience. She always chose, if she were out of reach, to run away. The Master, knowing hunger would bring her back to her pen, let her run. He could have stopped her: the rifle that would have ended her rebellion with the crack of doom stood in a corner. But while she lived she might still return to the obedience, might still choose the obedience that was freedom.

One day during a journey by car, Gypsy was taken into the edge of a wood. Always Gypsy had limited her disobedience to her own hills. But now coming back to the car, she suddenly felt the old thrill. She turned and fled. The master called with a note of sharp urgency. Gypsy, her ears dulled to the meanings of the Master, continued her rush into the dark forest. After hours of searching and calling, the Master sadly abandoned the lost one and went home.

Lost Gypsy, if she still lived, wandered the woods and roads an outcast. She became dirty and matted with burrs. No doubt stones were thrown at her and she was often hungry, but she had lost the way home. If she had puppies, they, too, and their children had lost the way home, for Gypsy's perilous and bent will to disobey must infect them; and the comforting hand of the Master would be unknown to them, except as a tale. This is the way Gypsy chose on the Day of the Rabbit and continued to choose until, suddenly, there was no more choosing.

Adam and Eve were the only human beings who knew truly "free" will. The rest of us, as their disobedient children, are bent toward rebellion, prone to go against the will of the Master. But through Jesus Christ and His death on our behalf, we can return and learn the joy of obedience to our gracious God. As Paul put it in Romans 6:17-18, "But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of

teaching to which you were committed, and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.”

Are you a slave of sin or of righteousness? Perhaps God in His grace is calling you from your disobedience to the obedience of faith in Jesus Christ. You begin by receiving the forgiveness that Christ provides through the cross.

Discussion Questions

1. What does the Bible mean, that God’s commandments are not burdensome (1 John 5:3)? Sometimes they seem very difficult!
2. Should we obey God even if we don’t feel like it? How can we make obedience a matter of the heart?
3. Are obedience and grace at odds? Some say that to emphasize obedience is to be legalistic. What does the Bible say?
4. Where should we draw the line between Christian unity and doctrinal and/or moral purity?

Copyright 1994, Steven J. Cole, All Rights Reserved.