



Minutes With Messiah

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A Watch in the Night

8:00 a.m to Noon: First Watch
Noon to 4:00 p.m.: Second Watch
4:00 to 6:00 p.m.: First Dog Watch
6:00 to 8:00 p.m.: Second Dog Watch
8:00 p.m. to Midnight: Night Watch
Midnight to 4:00 a.m.: Midwatch
4:00 a.m. to 8:00 a.m.: Morning Watch

That is how it is in the U.S. Navy. Other military services may have some variations on that, but they all have a schedule of watches. Security, after all, is paramount. Always has been; always will be. It is true today, and it was true under the Roman army, and even the Jewish army.

Almost nobody enjoys standing watch. You are stuck in one place (usually) for up to four hours, and hope your replacement isn't late. Daytime watches are a little better. At least there is some action, with people coming and going. Night watches are worse, because it is a lot of standing around, with an occasional drunk to worry about. With the morning watch, at least you know that the sun will come up and people will be coming to work. The worst, in most people's mind, is the midwatch. You may be able to get a little sleep first, but then you are awake and starving for four hours, only to get a couple of hours sleep afterward. And nothing happens. Absolutely, boringly, nothing.

We know that watches in the military are ancient, because the Bible tells us so. The Egyptian army was pursuing Israel through the surprisingly-divided Red Sea.

And it came to pass, that in the morning watch the LORD looked unto the host of the Egyptians through the pillar of fire and of the cloud, and troubled the host of the Egyptians, And took off their chariot wheels. (Ex 14:24-25)

Saul attacked the Ammonites beginning in the morning watch. (1 Sam 11:11) I said nothing happens in the midwatch. That is not necessarily true. Gideon knew how boring the midwatch could be, and took advantage.

So Gideon, and the hundred men that were with him, came unto the outside of the camp in the beginning of the middle watch; and they had but newly set the watch: and they blew the trumpets, and brake the pitchers that were in their hands. (Judg 7:19)

Not only did Gideon take advantage of the midwatch; he attacked at the start of the watch. That is the most confusing time of all. That is one midwatch I would not want to have been standing. (Not that I ever cared for any of them.)

Nobody looks forward to the midwatch. Well, almost nobody. Consider two psalms. "My mouth shall praise thee with joyful lips: When I remember thee upon my bed, and meditate on thee in the night watches." (Ps 63:5-6) "Mine eyes anticipate the night watches, that I might meditate in thy word." (Ps 119:148) The night watches are indeed a good time to study the word of God, especially if you are a night person. Just because nothing else happens during the night watches, nothing will happen to interfere with a close and diligent study of the scriptures.

The Bible does not just talk about the watches as a fact. One psalmist, at least, treated them metaphorically. "For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night." (Ps 90:4) The person who is standing a midwatch will find this passage hard to understand. There is nothing in the world that seems longer than a midwatch. Not even watching the movie "The Attack of the Killer Tomatoes." During the midwatch, even relativity seems to stop. And yet Moses says that to God a thousand years is as short as the midwatch. God is so far outside of time that he doesn't even notice the four hours that time stops entirely. That is even a comfort, because we can trust that God knows what he is doing. Because he is outside of time, he knows our future. He knows how things will work out. He even knows that, in the grand scheme of things, even the midwatch is nothing.

Contents

A Watch in the Night	1
Let's Have Fun	2
For Glory and For Beauty	4

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Let's Have Fun

Kids love to build shelters. They don't have to be good; they just have to be private. Sometimes it is a fort made out of chairs or tables and some blankets. Sometimes it is a "fort" made of scrap lumber and building supplies. There are two things that tend to characterize these structures: they are temporary, and they are fun. God decided that if kids liked such structures, maybe Jewish adults would, too. And maybe they would learn something in the process.

Also in the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when ye have gathered in the fruit of the land, ye shall keep a feast unto the LORD seven days: on the first day shall be a sabbath, and on the eighth day shall be a sabbath. And ye shall take you on the first day the boughs of goodly trees, branches of palm trees, and the boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook; and ye shall rejoice before the LORD your God seven days. And ye shall keep it a feast unto the LORD seven days in the year. It shall be a statute for ever in your generations: ye shall celebrate it in the seventh month. Ye shall dwell in booths seven days; all that are Israelites born shall dwell in booths: That your generations may know that I made the children of Israel to dwell in booths, when I brought them out of

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the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God. (Lev 23:39-43)

This was the law for *Sukkos*, the Feast of Tabernacles, or booths. (*Sukkos* begins on October 16 in 2016.) There was a reason behind the feast, besides just the gathering in of the fall crops. But it seems to have been more than a mere remembrance of the time the Jewish people wandered for forty years in the wilderness.

Camping in the back yard

The Feast of Booths is a time when even adults can enjoy the child-like pleasure of building a hut. The first part of the month is a solemn time, when they were warned of their sins, and then sought forgiveness of those sins. The day after the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*), the building of the huts begins. On the Naval base in Subic

Bay, Philippines, there was plenty of bamboo. The *sukka* (booth) there was usually made of that material, although they might have roofed it with the palm branches and willow required by the Law. In other places the *sukka* might be a wood structure leaning against a wall of the house. It could even be a lean-to like Jonah built outside of Nineveh. With a week to build it, some men figure out all sorts of ways to make it sturdy, yet compliant. Some might make it a real man-cave. Sometimes the women take over and decorate it with rugs and pictures. After all, a lot can be done in one week, even if the roof has to be open enough that you can see the stars at night. Building the *sukka* brings out the Jewish kid in everyone.

Who doesn't like building a hut? And then there is the opportunity to camp out in it for a week. OK, some people only take a meal in it each day. Others, though, play it to the hilt. It is a week of camping in the back yard. The thing is, though, that just like little kids camping in a tent in the back yard today, you know that if the going gets too tough, you can always go back inside the house. But there is where some of the learning comes in. Remember what God said? "That your generations may know that I made the children of Israel to dwell in booths, when I brought them out of the land of Egypt."

It can be fun to camp out for a week. But what about doing it for a year? Or for an additional forty years?

Getting what you want is not always easy. Do you want a new house, or even a new car? Sometimes you have to wait and save for it. The direct route from Goshen to Canaan would have taken the Israelites a couple of months at the most. But it was not the way to go.

And it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God led them not *through* the way of the land of the Philistines, although that *was* near; for God said, Lest peradventure the people repent when they see war, and they return to Egypt. (Ex 13:17)

The short, easy way would not be as easy as it looked. The Philistines would have fought with the people. As a slave nation, they were not yet familiar with war. They would have gotten disappointed and turned back. And so God led them through the Sea, and three months into the desert to Sinai. Almost a year later they finally reach the outskirts of the Promised Land. And how do the people react? "And there we saw the giants, the sons of Anak, which come of the giants: and we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight." (Num 13:33) They rebelled against war, and against God.

Lesson two: It's not nice to rebel against God. It had only taken a year to get where they were. Now it

would take forty more to get back to the same area. Every time someone spends time in the *sukka* they are supposed to think about this lesson. The Israelites who came out of Egypt had the opportunity to “go into the house,” so to speak. They could have spent the equivalent of a couple of hours in the booths, but ended up making it a full week (and then some).

Trust in God. Because there were giants, the people assumed they were as small as grasshoppers. And so they saw themselves as grasshoppers. But these same people had seen just what a swarm of locusts could do to a land. In Egypt, that plague had devastated the economy. With God’s help they could have done the same to Canaan, as small in stature as they were. Every year (every day) we need to remember that lesson. The old saying is that “I and God are a majority.” Well, God doesn’t even need you; but he is willing to work with you. Would you rather be a grasshopper, or a blade of grass in front of a swarm of grasshoppers? Would you rather be in Gideon’s army of 300, or the larger force of fleeing Midianites? Would you rather sleep in your own bed, or spend forty years in temporary shelters in the desert? The choice is offered at this time every year.

Let’s have fun

Trust, though, is only one of the lessons of *Sukkos*. Another may be even harder for some to learn. The Christian ideal, and even that in other religions, seems to be that of the old Puritan who is always frowning and won’t let people play cards or attend the theatre. Religion, for some, is that which you have to do when you would rather be having fun. But God told the Israelites to “rejoice before the LORD your God seven days.”

Did he specify this seven days as a time of rejoicing because he knew the people would not do so the rest of the year? Or is he saying this is a time of rejoicing, just as you should be doing all year long? In another place, speaking of this same feast, he says:

Seven days shalt thou keep a solemn feast unto the LORD thy God in the place which the LORD shall choose: because the LORD thy God shall bless thee in all thine increase, and in all the works of thine hands, therefore thou shalt surely rejoice. (Deut 16:15)

It seems almost contradictory to say to keep a “solemn” feast and then to command rejoicing. One has to remember, though, that the word solemn is not even implied in the Hebrew. The command is to keep a feast. There is a big contrast between the holiday immediately preceding this one. For *Yom Kippur* they were told to keep a “solemn assembly” (Hebrew *atsarah*, which does imply solemnity). For *Sukkot* they are told to keep a feast (Hebrew *chagag*, which carries the idea of dancing in a circle and possibly even drunkenness). This was to be a happy celebration.

So how can you be happy when remembering forty years of wandering in the wilderness? For that we can thank the nature of memory. God says to remember why the people wandered for so long; but rejoice because you aren’t subject to that. Camping in the back yard is fun. One reason it is fun is because it is temporary. Even the most ardent campers are happy to get home and do the laundry.

God tells us to have fun. The word rejoice appears in the Hebrew over 150 times. That doesn’t sound like the dour Calvinist. Instead, it’s party time. (In moderation, perhaps, or a little less than moderation.)

Even the thought of partying comes from the same root as the remembrance in the booth. Trust in God. Yes, you should remember to trust in God. But you should also rejoice because you have trusted in God. The memory may be of forty years of wandering, but it is also of the conquest of Canaan and the inheritance of the promise.

Religion, for some, is that which you have to do when you would rather be having fun. But God says to rejoice.

Do you have a reason to trust God? He doesn’t ask for mere belief; it is easy to believe there is a God. Rather he says to trust. Did something work out just the way you wanted it to? Was that coincidence, or was it a reason to trust? Did something work out in a way you didn’t want it to, but you realized that it was better? Mere chance, or a reason to trust? David said, “I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread.” (Ps 37:25) He had a reason to trust God. With that trust came also a reason to rejoice. Of the 152 times the word rejoice or be glad appears, 50 are in the Psalms. Many of those are in the psalms of David. Here is a man who had been chased by the king in order to execute him. He had been chased out of his capitol by his own son. And yet he knew why God told the people once a year to rejoice. God had not abandoned him; and he will not abandon us.

Whether you celebrate the Feast of Booths or not, the message is still there. Remember what can happen if you don’t obey God. But have fun when you do follow him. After all, it’s good to be a kid once in a while. It’s fun to build a hut that could fall in on you with the slightest wind. But it is good to know you are welcome back in the house, just in case.

For Glory and For Beauty

People will say, truly, that ours is a God of glory. He is worthy of honor. Even the prophets depict his glorious majesty. See, for instance, Habakkuk 3 or Revelation 4. When God commanded the Jewish people to make garments for the High Priest, he even wanted them to reflect his glory.

And thou shalt make holy garments for Aaron thy brother for glory and for beauty. ... And for Aaron's sons thou shalt make coats, and thou shalt make for them girdles, and bonnets shalt thou make for them, for glory and for beauty. (Ex 28:2, 40)

Yes, these garments were for glory, but in both verses God mentions both glory and beauty. It seems that God is concerned with glory, but also with beauty.

Imagine, if you will, a world of grey. No color variations anywhere. It is almost impossible even to move, because everything is the same, and you are afraid you will step on something (or nothing), or kick the walls or the furniture. If you can find a person, at least you don't have to worry about your looks. Nor would people pick a mate based on looks. Everything and everyone is the same. It sounds like a good plot for a science fiction story, but not for real life. We like variation, and we like beauty. And apparently God likes for us to have beauty.

While God paired glory and beauty in the priestly garments, that is not the only such reference in scripture. Actually, six more passages combine the thoughts of glory and beauty.

One of those passages is actually a contrast. "The glory of young men is their strength: and the beauty of old men is the gray head." (Ps 29:2) Most of the time,

however, glory and beauty are combined. "And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the beauty of the Chaldees' excellency, shall be as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah." (Isa 13:19) The Jewish habit of expressing one thing in two different ways equates glory with beauty in this and other passages.

Give unto the LORD the glory due unto his name; worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness. (Ps 29:2)

Each of us has his own concept of what is beautiful. One person likes Picasso, another Monet, and yet another Winslow Homer. Are you a devotee of Vivaldi, or Beethoven, or Metallica? There are differences in what we consider beautiful, but everybody has a concept of beauty. It seems, from all the passages that mention beauty, that God gave us this concept, and did so for our own good.

It is nice to imagine that God gave us beauty just for the sake of our appreciation, to think that God just wants us to be happy. That may indeed be part of it. But there is another part of the concept of beauty. We think of flowers or mountains or clouds in the sky as beautiful; but we also could include justice and righteousness and mercy. Part of our innate appreciation of the beautiful is our appreciation of right and wrong. Evil is wrong because, in part, it offends our sense of beauty. It is not by accident that RLS made Dr. Jekyll respectable and Mr. Hyde hideous.

Glory and beauty. Righteousness and justice. God gave us a sense of each. And how beautiful it is that he did so.

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