

Outside the Camp

(Exodus 33:1-11)

Bud Morris
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Let us go out to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach. Hebrews 13:13

In Exodus 14:21 the Lord accompanied His people on their journey from the bondage of Egypt to the Promised Land in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Verse 22 shows that His presence in the cloud was continuous--never removed from before the camp composed of God's people. So also the Lord has promised never to leave or forsake His people of this present Church Age as they engage in the spiritual journey from the bondage of sin and Satan in pursuit of the blessings the Lord has in store for them. (*Hebrews 13:5*)

But in Exodus chapter 32 the people turned away from the Lord to corrupt themselves in promiscuous idolatry. Except for Moses's intercession, the Lord would have utterly destroyed them in His anger. And even after Moses interceded for the people, the Lord refused to return to their midst, saying:

"... I will send an angel before you..."

"Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; for I will not go up in your midst, because you are an obstinate people, lest I destroy you on the way." Exodus 33:2,3

God could send His angel before them, but He simply could not personally be in the midst of His people because of their wilful sinfulness. It would only result in their judgment.

In Exodus 33:5 & 6, God stripped the people of their ornaments while He considered what He should do with them in their unfaithfulness. Apparently they were not permitted to wear their ornaments "From Horeb, onward." They remained a disciplined people throughout the rest of their journey, even though the Lord relented at Moses's entreaty, conceding, "*My presence shall go with you, and I will give you rest.*" (*Verse 14*).

In this context of failure and discipline we read that:

Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, a good distance from the camp, and he called it the tent of meeting. And it came about, that everyone who sought the Lord would go out to the tent of meeting which was outside the camp.

Exodus 33:7

God had consented to go the entire journey with His people, but He now accompanied them at a distance. Those who personally sought Him had to do so apart from any official claim on His presence--outside the camp.

Surely there is an analogy to this position "Outside the camp" in the wilderness journey of the Sons of Israel and the winsome admonition of Hebrews 13:11-13

*For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy place by the high priest {as an offering} for sin, are burned outside the camp. Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people through His own blood, suffered outside the gate. **Hence, let us go out to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach.***

Now Hebrews 13:11-13 primarily admonished Jewish Christians to forsake Judaism for real Christianity. It exhorted them to stop trying to force the new wine of Christianity into the old bottles of Judaism that could never contain it. And even in our day, many true Christians confuse the legalism of Judaism with the freedom of Christianity. Let us be completely done with the Law as a means for obtaining favor with God in this day of grace!

But the position "Outside the camp" is plausibly more symbolical than that. It is characterized as the place where the Judaistic sin offerings were burned--where a pungent aroma testified of the continual sins of the people of God. It was where the ashes of the red heifer were kept--a humbling affidavit to the recurrent defilement of God's people. (*Numbers 19:9*) It was where our despised and rejected Savior was crucified by those who officially sat in Moses's seat. (*Matthew 23:2*) And it is the place where Christians are admonished to shoulder His reproach. Should we not seek it today?

Any search for a position "Outside the camp" today necessitates a definition of the "Camp." In context, the camp of Exodus 33 was simply the mass of the Sons of Israel on their wilderness journey from Egypt to Canaan. Their credentials were that they were indeed Israelites--the people of God, although a mixed multitude of others accompanied them. (*Exodus 12:38, Numbers 11:4*) They possessed the "Oracles of God," and experienced His presence in a very real way. Finally, their willfulness and wickedness necessarily incurred His discipline, distancing Him from their midst. The important thing to notice is that the camp was not the failing portion of the people of God, but rather, the people of God in all their failure.

Now it is obvious that the Christian church has been every bit as unfaithful as the camp of Israel ever was. And despite delusional Charismatic efforts to revive them, it is just as obvious that the church has been stripped of its Pentecostal ornaments, such as the sign gifts that documented its position before God. Instead of the beautiful unity of its calling, it is hopelessly divided into many groups, each gathered on different principles with varying degrees of right or wrong that its members adhere to. The Christian associating himself with any part of the divided church, no matter how good, necessarily contributes to the division. The Christian church, along with the mixed multitude of the unregenerate that have forced their way into it (*Matthew 11:12, Luke 16:16*), is certainly analogous to the "Camp" of Israel. Typically, every Christian is a failing part of the "Camp" and personally falls under God's discipline on the "Camp."

Considering the ubiquitous worldliness, compromise, and division within the New Testament "Camp," the question is fairly raised, "How can a Christian take a position 'Outside the camp' today?" The only New Testament reference to a position "Outside the camp" intimately connects it with the personal presence and reproach of the Lord Jesus Christ:

Let us go out to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach. *Hebrews 13:13*

And the Lord, Himself, promised:

"Where two or three have gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst." *Matthew 18:20*

We can go forth to Him, then, as simply gathered in His precious name alone. And accepting our part in God's discipline on the "Camp" while penitently renouncing the evil within it, we can indeed take a position "Outside the camp."

Such a position "Outside the camp" strips off all ornaments of positional pride. It does not assume any official authority as the church; for it is not the position of the church, but rather the accessible position of a gracious Lord in spite of the failure of His church. To claim any official capacity is essentially to return to the "Camp." It admits to a personal part in the failure of the church instead of trying to sidestep the guilt. It acknowledges Christ's righteous judgment on His Church, and is humbly thankful that He has not totally denied us His presence, though it may be "Outside the camp." It individually seeks to put away the evil that Christ abhors in His people, and personally seeks His presence with a sanctified heart "Outside the camp." It accepts the reproaches of association with nothing but the rejected Christ.

This postulated position "Outside the camp" embraces the unity of the Body of Christ. It does not divide the people of God by positional or holier-than-thou claims. While it acknowledges every member of the body of Christ, it separates the contrite Christian from those who refuse to behave as Christians. It does not divide the body, for it humbly encourages all who are not excluded by the scriptures to worship together in spirit and truth at the feet of Christ. It allows the Christian to "Abstain from wickedness," to "Cleanse himself," and to:

Pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart. *II Timothy 2:22*

Hence, let us go out to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach.