

## 10. CLEARING THE WAY TO THE FATHER (2:13-25)

Many writers suggest that the attitude and actions that the Jews were to have and do regarding the temple is a picture of what was to happen in their hearts. This idea carries over into the New Testament and into the life of the Christian as is suggested by the words of Paul in passages like Romans 2:27-29 and 1 Corinthians 3:16.

We will study this passage in a similar vain as we look at the three acts that are part of the cleansing of the temple account that affect how the people of Israel approach the Father, that have implications for how we approach the Father today in our own temple – the temple of our heart.

But before we look at the text itself, let us first consider some historical context.

### THE JERUSALEM TEMPLE AND THE PASSOVER

The Temple in Jerusalem and the Passover Feast are the two most important elements of Judaism – without the temple the Passover Feast cannot be properly celebrated, and without the Passover, approaching God at the temple is impossible.

#### The Temple Complex

The first temple was built by Solomon on Mount Moriah in Jerusalem in about 950 BC to replace the tabernacle that was Israel's portable place of worship during their wanderings in the wilderness and for several hundred years at Shiloh after they entered the Promised Land. Solomon's Temple was destroyed in 587 BC when Nebuchadnezzar invaded and subsequently destroyed Jerusalem.

The second temple was built after their exile in Babylon when the Jews to Jerusalem under Zerubbabel in about 515 BC. This temple was damaged, plundered, and desecrated in 167 BC by the Greek conqueror Antiochus Epiphanes. The same occurred later under the Roman generals Pompey (in 63 BC) and Crassus (in 54 BC).

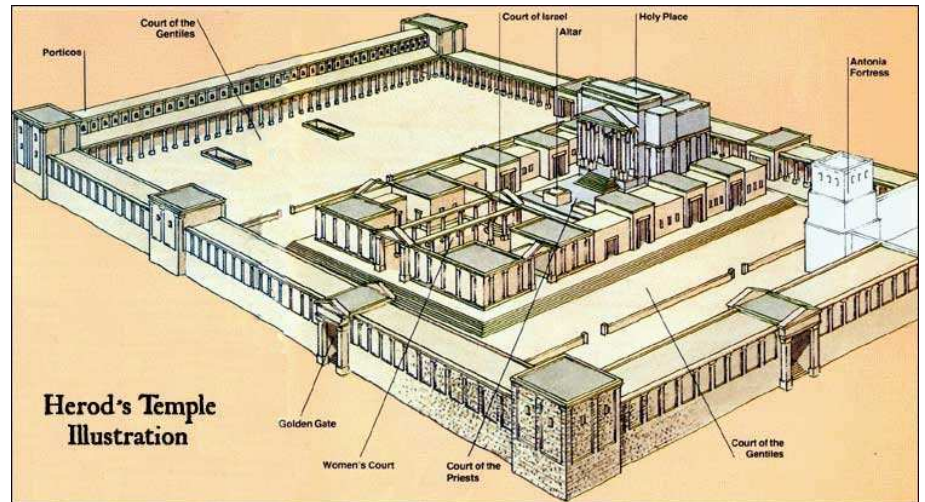
When Herod the Great stormed Jerusalem in 37 BC, he destroyed parts of the temple walls. However, eighteen years after he was made king of Israel by the Romans, he began to rebuild the temple – a task that continued through to AD 63.

10,000 skilled were employed to do the construction, however, the laity could not enter certain parts of the building, therefore, 1,000 Levites were trained to be masons and builders.<sup>43</sup> The work was started by levelling large portions of the Temple Mount by building a flat base supported by retaining walls. Next, the holiest building in the complex was constructed, The Holy Place, which contained the Holy of Holies. The front of the temple building was about 48,5 metres high and high, which is one-and-a-half times higher than the Dome of the Rock that stands there today. It was covered with white limestone that reflected the sun and could be seen from many kilometres away.

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<sup>43</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 15.11.2

Closest to the temple building itself was the Courts of Israel and of the Priests which were accessed by the Nicanor Gate. Situated within the Court of the Priests were the altar, the laver, and various chambers used by the priests. Next was the Court of Women where Jewish women were allowed to pray. This was separated from the Court of the Gentiles – the outermost court – by a stone balustrade about 1,5 meters high.



The Court of the Gentiles was paved with stone and was surrounded on three sides by the Royal Porticos of Solomon, as referred to as Solomon's Porch (cf. John 10:23| Acts 3:11; 5:12). These porticos were about 14 metres wide and supported by two rows of marble columns about 11 metres high. Both Jews and Gentiles were allowed in this area and is where the events in our account take place.

The Second Temple as finally destroyed by the Romans under Titus in 70 AD, just seven years after its completion, and has not been rebuilt. Later the Romans built palaces and a Temple of Jupiter, and the Byzantines a church, on the site. The present Dome of the Rock was built on the site by Muslim conquerors between 687-691 AD and the last remnants of the Second. Except for parts of the retaining walls that formed its foundation and are not part of the actual temple itself, every stone of the temple has been removed and reused elsewhere, fulfilling the prophecy of Jesus that no stone will be left on top of another (Luke 21:6). Remnants of the retaining walls are still visible today at the base of its Western Wall.

## The Passover

The Passover, along with the Feast of Unleavened Bread, was the first of the festivals to be commanded by God for Israel to observe (cf. Exo. 12; 23:14-17; Deu. 16:16) and all Jews were required to go to Jerusalem to celebrate. This is a springtime celebration occurring in the Hebrew month of Nissan (April/May in our modern calendar) that celebrates God delivering the Jewish people from Egyptian slavery. In remembrance of the Passover lambs sacrificed on the first Passover (cf. Exo. 13), lambs were sacrificed in Jerusalem each Passover.

The night of the first Passover was the night of the tenth plague where God took the lives of every first born in Egypt. This would have included the people of Israel as well if they did not obey God's command to sacrifice a spotless lamb and mark their door posts and lintels with its blood (cf. Exo. 12). That night, when the Lord passed through Egypt, He "passed over" the households that were marked with the blood (v. 23). The first born of the Israelites were saved from the plague, while the first born of the Egyptians died. From then on, every first born son of the Israelites belonged to the Lord and had to be redeemed with a sacrifice (cf. Exo. 13:1-2, 12; Luke 2:22-24).

Along with the instruction to apply the Passover lamb's blood to their door posts and lintels, God instituted the commemorative meal now known as the Feast of Passover. The Lord further commanded the Israelites to "*observe this rite as a statute for you and for your sons forever*" (Exo. 12:24), even when in a foreign land. This celebration is still held today, only without the temple and necessary sacrifices.

## ONE CLEANSING OR TWO?

While John's Gospel places the cleansing of the temple at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, the other gospels place it during the last week of his ministry. This raises the question of whether there was one cleansing or two.

While the other accounts of the cleansing are relatively similar to John's, Jesus' comment and the Scripture quoted are different. For example, in Matthew 21:13 Jesus alludes to two verses from the prophets – different to what we see in John (cf. Isa. 56:7; and Jer. 7:11). How do we reconcile these differences? There are three possibilities:

1. John's chronology is correct. The other gospels place the cleansing at the end because they do not record the events at the previous feasts and Passovers like John does.
2. The other chronology is correct and John placed it earlier for theological or literary reasons. This reasoning is similar to Luke placing Jesus' visit to Nazareth immediately after His temptation for literary and theological reasons (cp. Luke 4:14-30), compared to later in Matthew (13:54-58) and Mark (6:2-5).
3. There are two cleansings, one at the beginning and the other at the end of Jesus' ministry. It is not unlikely that animals and money-changers would return to the temple within a short period of time, requiring Jesus to repeat his earlier action. The fact that John's account is not mentioned in the other gospels and those accounts are not recorded in John would be for literary or theological reasons, depending on the author concerned (cf. 20:30-31).

A closer look at each account reveals further differences between them:

- Different Scripture is referred to.
- There is no mention of a whip in the other accounts.
- Jesus makes a different claim for himself in that cleansing of the temple at the end of his ministry.
- John's account shows Jesus' anger and violent response to the situation.

One key difference is that at the second cleansing, Jesus makes a great and final pronouncement about Israel. Standing in the temple after driving out the merchants and money-changers, he speaks these dramatic words: "*See, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'*" (Mat. 23:38-39; cp. Luke 13:34-35).

Many scholars agree that two cleansings are likely, especially given John's statements that Jesus did many more signs and spoke more words than what John, or any other author, can possibly record (cf. John 20:30-31, 31:25).

## THE DESECRATION OF THE TEMPLE (VV13-14)

It is common today for people to have no respect for anything sacred, no matter what faith it may represent. Churches and religious monuments and items are often the target of vandals. But if this was the first century, things would be much different. During the period of the Roman Empire, desecration of a temple, any temple, was a capital offence and executions were common. For the Jews this was especially true. For them, the temple was not merely a building where people gathered to worship, but represented their entire history as a nation, from the Exodus, through the time of the first temple built by Solomon, through their exile in Babylon and return to Israel with Ezra and Nehemiah, and the rebuilding of the temple under Zerubbabel. But more importantly it was the place where God chose to come down and make His home in the midst of His people. It was where He tabernacled with them.

The temple was also the place where they offered sacrifices in the presence of God himself. Every day, there were morning and evening sacrifices, and three times a year, there were the great annual festivals that drew thousands of Jews from around the world. The temple was the Jews' meeting place with God. Thus, the temple came to represent for the Jews far more than any church building means to us today.

In verse 13 we are told that Jesus and His disciples go up to Jerusalem for the Passover. This is the first of three Passovers mentioned in the gospel. But this is not the first time Jesus is in Jerusalem for the Passover. We know this because we read in Luke 2:41 that Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem every year for the Passover, and no doubt, Jesus continued to do so Himself in His adult years, even before this visit.

On this occasion, Jesus is confronted by the sale of animals and money changing in the temple grounds. However, it is important to note that these people are performing a valuable and much needed service for the nation of Israel. Since Jews travel to the city on foot – or at best on a donkey – from all across the Empire, it is not practical for them to bring their own sheep across the desert or Mediterranean Sea. For an animal to be acceptable for a sacrifice, it has to be without blemish, and this was not necessarily possible during such long journeys. Therefore, they have to purchase a suitable lamb suitable when they arrive in Jerusalem.

Furthermore, every male Jew over the age of twenty is expected to offer a half shekel of silver per year to support the temple. The problem though, is that the temple only accepts one kind of currency, Tyrian silver. Travellers were then to exchange their currency for the Tyrian silver.

Originally the traders and money-changers operated across the valley on the lower slopes of the Mount of Olives. Later they were given a place to trade in a lower part of the temple complex out of the way – ruins of these spaces are still seen today. However, as the population grew, so to did business, and the traders sought a location with higher visibility and foot traffic. And so they move into the court of the Gentiles within the temple grounds. But this becomes a problem as they take over the areas originally set aside for worship, resulting in it being unsuitable for worship. The temple has been desecrated and access to the Father is restricted.

That is until Jesus enters the temple on this day, fulfilling the prophecy in Malachi 3:1-3.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. Our hearts are desecrated by sin – we were born with original sin and our natural tendency, like the Apostle Paul (see Rom. 7:18-20), still takes us in that direction. What are some of the sins that get in the way of your worship and prayers to God?
2. From a practical point of view, what things of life get in the way of your worship? Perhaps distractions or activities on a Sunday.

## THE DRIVING OUT FROM THE TEMPLE (VV15-17)

John uses strong verbs to describe Jesus' actions; "*drove*", "*poured out*", "*overturned*", and then the command "*do not make*". Jesus is clearly angry. But we must not minimise Jesus' anger or violence, even if it is not how we typically see, or like to see, Him. He did become angry on occasions. Here He crafts a whip and overturns the tables. On two other occasions He rebukes the Scribes and Pharisees, calling them a brood of vipers (Mat. 12:34, 23:33).

The difference, however, is that although He is angry, He is not raging furiously or attacking everyone who happens to be in the temple. In fact, His actions are rather controlled and even shows concern for people. We see His concern in that He does not overturn the tables of the people selling the birds but simply tells them to leave. Unlike the money that can be gathered and counted, or the sheep and oxen that can be herded again and sold elsewhere, should the pigeons escape their cages if broken when flung to the floor, they will be lost forever, and so too any income they could gain from these birds.

The point is, Jesus is not rebuking them for trading – because they are performing a necessary service and they also need to earn a living – but is rebuking them for where they are trading and the consequences thereof. They have turned what should be a house of prayer and worship into a place that is focussed on business which results in people being unable to pray and worship. Interestingly, the word in Greek that John uses here is "*emporium*" which stresses they focus on trade and income rather than prayer and worship.

Furthermore, although Jesus is God, He does not make this personal – He does not make it about Himself. We see this in the fact that He refers to the Temple as "*my Father's house*" and not something like "*my house*", or "*you have offended me*". Instead He is angry that they have defiled His Father's holiness and restricted access to Him.

Jesus response is appropriate to the situation and is what is referred to as righteous indignation or holy anger. This is not an impulsive act, a burst of rage, or anything of that nature, but is a calculated and planned response to something that is an offence to God. And although the text does not mention it, part of His anger may also be the fact that God's people are not angry at it themselves when they should be – things should never have become so bad.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. Because of our freedom in Christ and the fact that holding to a strict Sabbath rest is no longer prescribed, business thrives on a Sunday, with some business recording record sales on Sundays. Does this mean that we are now free to work on a Sunday? Why or why not?
2. What principles from Jesus' actions and words in these verses can you draw that apply to the modern context of Sunday business?

A principle that we can draw from this is that to God, worship is far more important than convenience or wants. Sometimes this can be rather inconvenient and painful to us. Verse 17 shows us just how painful it was for Jesus – “*Zeal for your house will consume me*”. This is a direct quote from Psalm 69 verse 9, but why does John use it?

This quotation is what is known in Jewish Rabbinical teaching as a *remez* – roughly translated as a hint – and is meant to remind his readers of the context and/or events surrounding the original verse and not only the verse itself. In this case, David in Psalm 69:7-9, is crying out to God in his suffering due to those whom he trusts proving themselves untrustworthy simply because of his zeal for the Lord's house. This is not a reference to him being so overcome with zeal that he can not think of anything else.

Psalm 69 is also a Messianic psalm, that is, although its initial context is King David and what happens to him, it is pointing towards its ultimate fulfilment in the Messiah. Therefore, what John is saying here is that Jesus' zeal for His Father's House will result in His persecution and will suffer because of these actions and words (see Mat. 26:60-61).

As with the previous section, these verses serve as a catalyst to Jesus' ministry and in them we again see the beginning of His end on earth as His journey towards the cross begins.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. Jesus grew angry at the sin that led to the desecration of the temple. What sins are there in your heart that cause you to become angry? How do you deal with them?
2. Read Psalm 51. This psalm reflects true repentance of a man who is confronted by the desecration of his own heart. How would you apply this psalm to your desecrated heart as you seek to drive out sin?
3. Spend some time in repentant prayer using Psalm 51 as your guide.

## THE DESTRUCTION OF THE TEMPLE (VV18-25)

The final act in this account is the destruction of the temple, but not the temple in the city in AD 70 when the Romans lay siege, but of Jesus' body.

Verse 18 sets the scene. These Jews are the temple authorities and have the right, and indeed the obligation, to challenge this kind of behaviour. But what is significant here is that they do not question Jesus as though He is just some thug who comes in, overturns the tables, steals some money or goods, and then runs off. They have more than enough resources, laws, and authority to deal with a thug like that. But rather, their concern is about what Jesus said, because for someone to make a comment like He does implies that He has been given some authority. So they question where that authority comes from.

However, they are not really interested in His answer. They are not seeking the truth, but avoiding it. They are also challenging Him, for if He contradicts the other leaders, then they have reason to arrest Him. But Jesus sees through their question and answers in verse 19, *“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up”*.

The Jews do not understand Jesus here, and so mock Him by saying that it has taken forty-six years to build the temple, and even at this time it is still not complete. The heart of their question is how can Jesus think that He can restore it in three days? Because it is impossible to do so, then He must be mad and they have no reason to believe Him.

But, as John points out in verse 21, the temple that Jesus is talking about is not the one made of stone and mortar, but that which is made of flesh and blood – His body. This goes back to the tabernacle image from chapter 1:14.

The Tabernacle and the temple were the meeting places between God and His people in the Old Testament. Therefore, Jesus is saying that He is now the ultimate meeting place between God and man. Jesus is now the temple (The replacing an Old Testament image with the reality of Christ is something that we will see several times in our study of this gospel).

But Jesus’ words are even more profound, because He does not only say that He is now the temple, but refers to its destruction, that is, His death. Not only were the tabernacle and temple in the Old Testament the meeting places of God, there were also places of sacrifice. So by answering this way He is also saying that He is also the sacrifice at the temple. Furthermore, in the Old Testament the priests performed the sacrifices. In the book of Hebrews there are several references to Jesus being the High Priest, and not just any High Priest, but the better High Priest who offers the sacrifice, in the presence of God and man, yet is Himself, the Lamb of God who is sacrificed (cf. Heb. 2:17; 3:1; 4:14-15; 5:1-10; 6:20; 7:25-28; 8:1-3; 9:6-10; 13:10-12).

All these Old Testament images point to one person, Jesus Christ.

So in His answer, Jesus states that He is the temple, He is the Lamb sacrificed at the temple, and He is the High Priest who offers the sacrifice. No wonder the zeal of God consumes Him, because these are astonishing statements to make in front of a nation that takes blasphemy so seriously. No wonder they want to stone Him to death later in chapter 8.

However, this temple must be destroyed in order for the sacrifice to be made, because His death means our life. The death of one man results in the life of all who believe in Him (see 11:45-57, esp. 51-52). The ultimate meeting place between God and man is not the crib in Bethlehem, but the cross in Jerusalem. As important as it is that Jesus is born as a man and that we celebrate Christmas, its importance disappears if it is separated from the cross. Jesus was born to die and His death and resurrection are the hinge upon which salvation and all of history swings (cf 1 Cor. 15:3-4).

However, there is still some misunderstanding among the disciples (v22) and the people (vv23-25). For the disciples specifically, they do not fully understand Jesus' answer at this point, but will do so after His ascension. But for the others, they misunderstand Him and continue to do so. Although they see His signs and believe – what the signs are specifically here we are not told. However, their belief is based only on the signs of Jesus and not on His person. This kind of belief is shallow and fickle. This is why Jesus does not “*entrust*” or “*commit*” Himself to them – He does not see them as true disciples. No matter what they say, He knows their hearts. What is more, if Jesus entrusts himself to these people, they will try to make him king like we will see they indeed try to do in chapter 6.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. Over the last few decades, rumours of revivals and mighty moves of God have done the rounds which have caused many people to flock to those events. Although God may have been at work on those occasions, typically it is not the teaching that draws the crowds, but the signs and wonders. What is the problem with faith that rests solely on miracles? Is it true faith? What is necessary for it to develop into true faith?
2. What other verses come to mind that speak into these and similar situations?