



## TEMPLE TIRADE

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 John 2:12-25  
 Sixth Message  
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Ancient Jerusalem was a magnificent city. Even today, viewed from the Mount of Olives at sunrise, the Old City presents a spectacular sight. One can only imagine its splendor during the reigns of David and Solomon. For many years in the midst of that glorious setting, Solomon's temple stood on Mt. Zion. The temple: the last installment of God's presence with his people that had begun with the tent of meeting during the Exodus from Egypt.

That edifice was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BC. Following seventy years of exile, Judah returned to the land, and Zerubbabel rebuilt the temple. But it was only a shadow of its former counterpart, and lacked the presence of God's glory. Around 20 BC, Herod began to rebuild and expand it to restore its former glory. This was the temple that stood in Jerusalem during the time of Jesus, and later destroyed by the Romans in AD 70.

It's hard for us to grasp the significance of the temple for the Jewish people. Comprising 25% of the city area, it was the center of their life and identity, the very hub of political, religious, and economic activity. To the Jews, Jerusalem was New York City, Washington D.C. and Los Angeles all rolled into one. The temple was where people met with God, and the focal point of their relationship with him. Annual pilgrimages to the site were occasions of great significance and joy. The psalmist said, "A day in Your courts is better than a thousand outside" (Ps 84:10).

We have no national or religious symbol in the United States that corresponds to what the temple meant for the people of Israel. The Lincoln Memorial, the Liberty Bell and the Washington Monument fall far short. Catholics would say that they have St. Peter's. Muslims and Hindus would suggest other holy places. Only recently, with the horrific events of 9/11, could we begin to identify with the emotions that the Jews experienced at the destruction of both the first and the second temples.

What I want you to envision is the magnitude of meaning that surrounded the temple when Jesus entered it one day and shocked the Jews with a bold outburst. Our text from the gospel of John brings us to the story of the temple cleansing. The synoptic gospels place this story at the end of Jesus' ministry, while here in John's account we find it at the beginning. Some scholars think that John organized his material topically. Others believe that there were two temple cleansings. Both accounts occurred close to Passover; Jesus overturns tables in both; and in both the question of his

authority is raised. However, significant differences in the accounts indicate that John recorded a separate event. Perhaps this is the most natural way to read the text. The first time Jesus cleansed the temple it marked him; the second time it did him in.

**After this He went down to Capernaum, He and His mother and His brothers and His disciples; and they stayed there a few days. The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. (John 2:12-13 NASB)**

John uses the little phrase "after this" frequently to transition between narratives, but here there is no indication of time. Some time after the wedding at Cana, Jesus and his family, including his mother and half-brothers, moved to Capernaum. The synoptics place this move at the beginning of his ministry. Capernaum lay about 16 miles east and north of Cana, on the north-west shore of the Sea of Galilee. Apparently they stayed there for but a few days before leaving to celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem.

Jesus went down to Capernaum and then up to Jerusalem (the capital city is at a higher elevation). This marks one way in which John differs from the other writers. He records that Jesus went back and forth to Jerusalem, while the other gospels say he spent his public ministry in Galilee and went to Jerusalem just prior to that final week.

Passover was near. John mentions three Passovers in his account, here in chapter 2 and again in chapters 6 and 11 (2:13; 6:4; 11:55). There may be a fourth Passover in chapter 5 (5:1). John builds his gospel around the Jewish feasts. This is very important for the reader. While anyone can read John's story and grasp some of its meaning, for a full understanding one must be aware of the Jewish traditions and feasts. He writes that it is the Passover of the Jews, not because his readers were Gentiles, but because the Jews were the residents of Judea, and the Passover was being celebrated in the temple in Jerusalem. As we have seen, "the Jews" represent organized religion. Whenever we see this phrase we could well substitute the words "the church."

Passover commemorated the night when the angel of death "passed over" the Jewish homes that were sprinkled with blood in the prescribed manner, but killing the first-born in all other homes. Afterwards the Jews escaped Egypt. They became God's son and God dwelt with them. They expected that their salvation from Rome would be repeated on the day of Passover.

**And He found in the temple those who were selling oxen and sheep and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. And He made a scourge of cords, and drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen; and He poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables; and to those who were selling the doves He said, "Take these things away; stop making My Father's house a place of business." His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for Your house will consume me" (2:14-17)**

Once again, it is hard for us to imagine the magnitude of Jesus' actions. They would have brought everything to a halt. Imagine watching the Super Bowl on television and suddenly hearing this announcement:

We interrupt this program to bring you this special report. "Hello, this is Dan Rather reporting from the CBS studios in New York City. Today in the city of Jerusalem, a man by the name of Jesus sent shock waves through the Jewish community. Apparently, he walked into the temple area on the eve of Passover and chased everyone and everything out. There is no indication that Jesus is connected with an underground terrorist movement. Authorities believe Jesus acted alone, but are baffled as to his motivation. He was questioned and released, but authorities are continuing to monitor his activities. We will continue to update you as this story develops and will have a full report after the game."

Observe the scene. People, cattle, sheep and doves crowd the courts surrounding the temple. Pilgrims from afar bought their sacrifices there to be offered on the altar in front of the temple, probably in the court of the Gentiles. The money-changers converted currency for the throngs coming to Jerusalem from all over. They exchanged foreign currency for Tyrian coinage which was used because of the high purity of its silver to pay the annual temple tax of half-shekel. The money-changers made a percentage for their service.

Why was Jesus so upset? There is no evidence that the animal merchants and money-changers were corrupt and thus should not be engaged in business. John does not say that Jesus quoted Jeremiah about a "den of thieves." Jesus was forceful, but not cruel. He used a whip made of ropes to drive out the animals. His complaint was that the Jews had made his Father's house a place of business, literally an emporium. The sacrificial animals being purchased and offered were a matter of convenience. People didn't bring their best; they bought and offered what was available. Commerce was more prominent than worship at the temple. They had what we could call a sacrifice ATM.

Jesus' disciples remembered the text from Psalm 69:9: "Zeal for Your house will consume me." It's not clear whether this thought occurred to them then or after the resurrection. The psalmist was crying out to God over the opposition of his foes to his commitment to the temple and to Yahweh. The foes in Psalm 69 were from the household of God. John focuses on the zeal of Jesus in his regard for the temple, even his jealousy for its proper use.

On one level we can say that Jesus was concerned with pure worship, but I don't think this is the primary thrust of the story. Worship will be a theme that Jesus will revisit with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman. Worship of God is intended to come from the heart, without clamor or distracting influences. God doesn't want religion or sacrifice; he seeks a contrite heart. Perhaps Jesus was concerned with how things appeared to the Gentiles. Were they observing a people worshipping from the heart, or merely organized religion? "Instead of solemn dignity and the murmur of prayer, there is the bellowing of cattle and the bleating of sheep. Instead of brokenness and contrition, holy adoration and prolonged petition, there is noisy commerce."<sup>1</sup>

The temple was symbolic of the soul of man, with the holy of holies at the heart. When we gather we must do so with pure hearts. We must remove distractions like the noise of busyness, activities of commerce or politics, and attitudes of getting things done. We also must be aware that Gentiles, non-believers, might be in our midst and be sensitive to their perception of what is taking place. Do they experience God or mere religion? Religious activity is easy; true worship isn't. Some people come to church to seek out people they know. They are more conscious of how they appear than they are of worshipping God. We don't prepare our hearts and we arrive late. We shop for churches the way we shop for home loans. We don't have to be legalistic, but we do need a zeal for worship instead of a self-service religion or an ATM approach to sacrifice. Worship is not about externals, it's about hearts. Oftentimes it is easier and more satisfying for us to worship God when we are alone in creation than when we are gathered together at church.

But John wants to tell us a second thing. This becomes evident in Jesus' conversation with the religious authorities.

**The Jews then said to Him, "What sign do You show us as your authority for doing these things?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "It took forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?" But He was speaking of the temple of His body. So when He was raised from the dead, His disciples remembered that He said this; and they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken. (2:18-22)**

Destruction or desecration of a temple or other place of worship was regarded as a capital offense in the Graeco-Roman world. The Jews did not put Jesus into jail. They knew that he was right and that they had been had. They must suspect that he was prophet or else they would have had him taken away. So they question him and demand to see his credentials for doing something so shocking. They display no reflection or self-examination with regard to his actions. They are less concerned about pure worship than they are with authority and precedent. They want a sign from Jesus to

justify his authority. However, if the authorities had eyes to see, they would have observed that he had already done a sign by cleansing the temple.

Jesus tells them that if they destroy the temple, he will raise it in three days. This is the sign of Jonah. At Jesus' trial, false witnesses would say, "We heard Him say, 'I will destroy this temple made with hands, and in three days I will build another made without hands'" (Mark 14:58). Jesus did not say, "I will destroy." He said, "You destroy." The Jews focus on the physical and material. They tell Jesus that it had taken 46 years to build the temple. Herod's temple was begun in 20/19 BC, and so that brings us to AD 27/28. However, the temple was not actually completed until around AD 64, only six years before it was destroyed.

John explains Jesus' comment, saying that Jesus was referring to the temple of his body. His point is that Jesus is the new temple. He came not only to cleanse and purify temple worship but to replace the temple altogether. Last week we saw that Jesus replaced the water of self-effort with the wine of the Spirit. Today we see that he replaces the temple building with the true temple. Our worship not only needs to be pure, it has to be centered in Jesus. John's main point is that the person of Jesus is the only place where we can enter into the presence of God.

The images in the Old Testament are given as pictures for us. The temple was the final stage for where God would dwell with his people and where his glory could be seen. This was the place of sacrifice where God had provided the "mercy seat" at which sin could be put away and men and women could come into his presence. The temple was the place where God "tabernacled" with his people. But the physical temple only pointed forward to a better and final meeting point between God and man. Now Jesus comes on the scene to replace the temple and fulfill its purpose. He is the place where we can come to God. He is the "mercy seat" where sins are forgiven. He is the sacrifice that cleanses and purifies our hearts. He is the place where the glory of God can be seen and experienced.

And not only that, Jesus has the authority to cleanse and redefine the temple because it is his. He claims his right of ownership predicted by Malachi: "'Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming,' says the LORD of hosts" (Mal 3:1). John records his vision of the new Jerusalem: "I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are its temple" (Rev 21:22).

Jesus' words were unthinkable to the Jews and even to the disciples. John says that even they did not understand them until after the resurrection. That was when they believed in the "word" which Jesus had spoken in verse 20, and understood that the Scriptures were fulfilled in him.

The theological implications of this text are enormous. But what does it mean practically for us? First, worship is not only important to God, the place of worship is, too. At times, believers can act just like the Jews did on this occasion. Religion replaces sincere relationship. We trade sacred places that we build with our hands for the temple of God in Jesus. When we want to meet with God we go to some holy place thinking we can find him there. We find our security in "ATM sacrifices" and convenient religion. Our religious activity becomes more and more commercial. The narrative is telling us that if we want to come into God's presence, we have to do it at the feet of Jesus, through him and in him.

The day when my wife accepted Christ she got all dressed up to go to Stanford Chapel, the most beautiful church around. But before she left she lay down and had a vision. Two men came to her. She knew that one was God, but she didn't know the identity of the second. God said to her, "This is my Son Jesus. I want you to know him." That was the day she asked Jesus into her life. She didn't have to go the Stanford Chapel to find God, to do the right religious thing. All she had to do was come to Jesus.

I grew up in a traditional church setting. While there is nothing wrong with stained glass windows and choirs, the church was filled with religious feelings, but not the presence of Jesus. We meet God in Jesus and only in Jesus, not in a place, but in a person. We have to ask if there are things that clutter our path to him. Do we seek to meet with God or find forgiveness for sin in any other way except through Jesus?

Secondly, Jesus continues to claim the right and authority to keep cleansing the temple. As we learn in the New Testament, the church, not the building but the people of God, is now the temple or dwelling place of God. Because our bodies are a temple of the Holy Spirit, what we do with them is important to God. Sleeping with someone's wife is wrong. Viewing pornography on the Internet is wrong. Taking pride in our religious accomplishments is wrong. Spreading lies and deceit is wrong. Failing to forgive is wrong. People don't like this side of Jesus, this God who is zealous for pure hearts and holy people. They much prefer the God who turns water into wine and transforms life.

Jesus is Lord! He is the owner of this temple and has the right and the authority to cleanse it. He is the only one who can do so. If we respond like the Jews did on that day, we will question his authority and say, "How dare you interfere with us and disrupt what we are doing?" That is how religion responds. But those who are zealous for a pure heart say, "Yes, Lord, come and purify your temple."

**Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name, observing His signs which He was doing. But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for**

**He knew all men, and because He did not need anyone to testify concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man. (2:23-25)**

Jesus did many signs on that Passover, things that are similar to the ones John wrote about in his gospel. And, seeing these signs, "many believed in his name," i.e. his authority. But, as is often the case in this gospel, their faith was spurious because it was based on the wrong things. They claim to believe in Jesus, but he does not believe them or entrust himself to them. He knew what was in man. Jeremiah said, "I, the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind" (Jer 17:10). God always knows what we are thinking.

The Jews were continually asking Jesus for a sign. In every generation, Christians and non-Christians alike continue to do the same thing. "God, I need a sign," they say. "Show me a sign and I will believe in you. If you get me out of this foxhole I will turn my life over to you. If you help me get a promotion, then I will know that you are real, then I will trust you." That is to ask God to be domesticated. People want to reduce God to something understandable and predictable. They want to put God in a box.

But Jesus will not comply with those kinds of demands. A faith that is based on signs is precarious and inadequate. Signs and wonders and miracles don't command genuine faith. Believing in a miraculous deed is a start; it's the beginning of faith. True faith is when we believe in the significance of the sign. Signs point the way, but saving faith must go beyond. Believing in signs and believing in Jesus are two different things. How do you approach Jesus?

Sitting atop a hutch in our house is a sign that says "Believe." When I sit in my chair reading I sometimes stare at that sign. It points me to Jesus, and asks a simple question: Will I believe in Jesus today? Will I believe even though I feel guilt and shame? Will I believe even though I am not feeling good about myself? Will I believe even though I am fearful? That sign reminds me to believe not in what Jesus can do, but in who he is. He is the temple. He is the mercy seat. He is the sacrifice. He is the place where I can come to God. When we gather, let us do so with a zeal for purity, a desire to be cleansed, and a faith that is based on Jesus, not on signs.

1. D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 179.

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