

## John 2b, Cleansing the Temple

10/2/2004 8:21 AM

### 13-25, First Passover in Jerusalem

The dominant rhythm of the gospel of John is a movement back and forth between “his own place” (Jerusalem) and the rest of the land of Israel. Here for the first time, our Lord visits Jerusalem. He does so in obedience to the law (Exod 23:14; Deut 16:16), which required every Jewish male to come to Jerusalem for the three pilgrimage feasts: Passover, Weeks, and Tabernacles.

John’s account of our Lord’s first visit to Jerusalem extends through 3:22, and has two major parts.

- 2:13-22 describe the cleansing of the temple, and reflect his *rejection* by the Jews.
- 2:23-3:22 describes his interaction with those who *believed* on him, in particular, Nicodemus. The introductory section of this episode is in ch. 2, while the main body is in ch. 3.

### 13-22, Cleansing the Temple

**14, those that sold ... the changers of money.**—Jerusalem must have had many marketplaces, and many moneychangers catering to pilgrims from other lands, but these had a special function. Consider each of them individually.

- The OT law specified that sacrificial animals were to be “without blemish” (33x in the Pentateuch). The priests inspected each sacrifice to determine that it was acceptable, and if it was not, it could not be offered. Consider a pilgrim from afar, who either has gone to the trouble of bringing his sacrifice with him, or has purchased one in the city, and then brings it to the temple to offer to the Lord. If the priests find it blemished, he cannot offer it, and it goes to waste.
- Lev 27:1-7 provides for vows to be repaid financially, on a scale that varied with the age and gender (and thus the earning power) of the person. The required amounts are specified in terms of “the shekel of the sanctuary.” In addition, in inter-testamental times, an annual tax of half a shekel was imposed on every male, to be paid the month before Passover, again in the temple currency. (Actually, in Moses’ time, “shekel” was a weight, not a coin, and the point of the command was to specify how much silver people had to weigh out for their payment. But by the time of Christ, coins were well established, and “the shekel of the sanctuary” had come to mean a specific kind of coin rather than a measure of weight.) People with other currencies had to convert them into the temple currency in order to make these offerings.

Someone had a good idea. To save pilgrims trouble, wouldn’t it be nice if the temple could make pre-approved animals and currency available? If the Levites ran the market, they could insure that the animals were unblemished, and that the right currency was available. And they would put this market right in the court of the Gentiles, so that everyone could have easy access to it.

## John 2b, Cleansing the Temple

This practice may have been quite old. Zech 14:21 (ca. 500 BC) describes as one characteristic of the messianic period that “there shall be no more the Canaanite in the house of the LORD of hosts.” The word “Canaanite” can refer not only to an ethnic group, but also to the trade of being a merchant (as in Prov 31:24). This is in fact more likely, in view of the emphasis of Zechariah 14:16ff on all nations coming up to worship. In that case Zechariah is lamenting the same corruption that our Lord later corrects.

There were only two problems with this arrangement, and our Lord highlights one of them each time he cleanses the temple.

1. In John 2:16, he protests, “make not my Father's house an house of merchandise.” By holding a market in the temple, they are detracting from its main purpose, which was the worship of God. They are defocusing it and debasing it.
2. By the end of his ministry, in Matt 21:13, the market has reestablished itself, and this time he protests, “It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves.” Now the focus is on their avarice, which apparently led them to overcharge and take advantage of their virtual monopoly.

Each of these holds an important lesson for the church. It should be focused and free.

- It should be *focused* on the purposes for which God has ordained it: doctrine, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayers. We should beware of modern “mall church,” that brings within the church structure a wide range of formalized ministries (specialized counseling services, day care, schools, ...). There is nothing wrong with Christians pursuing such ministries as the Lord leads them, but the local church can easily become defocused from its biblical purposes.
- It should be *free*. Whenever money becomes involved, it opens an opportunity for the natural cupidity of the human heart, and numbers and margins come to dominate over love for the Lord and tenderness toward him.

**15 he drove them all out of the temple.**—The Lord’s action seems harsh to us, but we must remember that He is here as the divine Son of God (“my Father’s house”), revealing his authority. His action is the partial fulfillment of two OT prophecies, both of which will be completely fulfilled on his second coming:

- Mal 3:1-3 predicts his sudden return to the temple, to purify the sons of Levi.
- If we have correctly understood Zech 14:21, that passage looks forward to the removal of commerce from the temple precincts.

**17 The zeal of thine house hath eaten me up.**—His actions recall to his disciples Psa 69:9. We cannot place the psalm with any certainty in David’s life; it seems to be a synthesis of many different events and occasions. But its main application is messianic, being quoted more times in the NT than any other OT portion except for Psa 22 (Perowne). Note the parallel: “the reproaches of them that reproached thee are fallen upon me.” David understands himself as suffering because of the righteous stands he takes, compare 1 Pet 4:14 and other passages in 1 Pet about inappropriate suffering. It is a godly thing to be so identified with the Lord that we take offense at attacks against him.

## John 2b, Cleansing the Temple

This is the first of two lessons learned by the disciples from this episode, the second being his resurrection (v.22). That lesson they didn't appreciate until later, and no doubt they didn't seize the full sense of this one at the outset, either. A full perusal of the Psalm whose verse entered their minds will show that it predicts the suffering of the Messiah, not his triumph. Thus in the very moment that he asserts his authority over the temple, he is also anticipating his coming death and subsequent resurrection.

*This Psalm "is quoted in the New Testament at least seven times; the 4th verse in John 15:25; the 9th verse in John 2:17, and Romans 15:3; the 21st verse in Matthew 27:34, 48, and John 19:28, 29; the 22d and 23d verses in Romans 11:9, 10; and the 25th verse in Acts 1:16, 20." (Anderson's notes to Calvin's commentary). Perowne notes that this psalm has more NT references than any other OT passage except Psa 22.*

**18 What sign shewest thou unto us?**—The Jews were notorious for “require[ing] a sign,” 1 Cor 1:22. This is the first of multiple instances in the gospels when they thus challenged him:

- John 6:30, at the bread of life discourse, “What sign shewest thou then, that we may see, and believe thee?” What an audacious request, since they have just seen the multiplication of the loaves and fishes!
- Matt 12:38, after calling the Jews a “generation of vipers,” they ask a sign, but he condemns them as an “evil and adulterous generation” whose only sign will be that of Jonah, the type of resurrection.
- Matt 16:1, Mark 8:11, Luke 11:29 is another request for a sign, this time explicitly said to be for the purpose of “tempting” Christ. Again, the only sign offered is that of Jonah.

Note that the disciples followed him for his teaching (ch. 1) and were rewarded by an unsolicited sign (ch. 2), while the Jews, who reject his teaching, demand a sign and are rebuffed.

- The flesh says, “If I see, I will believe.” This is the order demanded by
  - The chief priests and scribes at the cross, Mark 15:32
  - The Jews after the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, 6:30
  - Thomas, 20:25.
  - Compare our Lord's rebuke to the bystanders when the nobleman of Capernaum asked him to heal his son, 4:48
- The Lord promises, “If you will believe, you will see” (11:40, to Martha at the tomb of Lazarus).

**19-21, the destroyed and rebuilt temple.**—Two things are noteworthy about the Lord's response, and both are characteristic of his later ministry as well.

1. The only sign he gives sign-seekers is his own resurrection. If they will not believe that, they will not believe anything else. The Lord is not a stage magician. His purpose is not entertainment, but challenging people to repent and believe. The demand for signs (or, among the Greeks, for a rational proof, 1 Cor 1:22b) is not a sincere need, but a smokescreen to keep them from confronting the real issue, which is their sin. Paul's answer to this demand in 1 Cor 1 is not to satisfy it, but to offer instead “the foolishness of preaching,” 1 Cor 1:21-24, simply proclaiming the truth. We are called to sow seed

## John 2b, Cleansing the Temple

that will sprout only in fertile ground, not to blast rock and compost thorns in an effort to create good soil.

2. His response is oblique. See his astonishing explanation of this policy in Matt 13:10-15. He who knows all men's hearts does not cast his pearls before swine (Matt 7:6). He speaks clearly to those who wish to hear, but to those who are opposed, he often cloaks his teaching in parables. (Thus his purpose in giving parables is not didactic, but obscurantist, a lesson we should keep in mind if we are tempted to use them in teaching children.)

**22 his disciples remembered.**—Even the disciples didn't understand the full import of his teaching at the time, but after the resurrection, it clicked into place. Compare also John 12:16. This is a common experience with many parts of the Word of God. The Scriptures are not given for our abstract study, but to guide us in daily life, and certain passages often lie quietly, unnoticed and unobtrusive, until we meet some experience that suddenly renders them brilliantly relevant. Much of eschatological revelation is probably to be understood in this way, and it would be a mistake for us to think that we can fully understand those passages before we need them.

### **23-25, *The Lord's Reticence***

This section is the introduction to the Nicodemus story, and we will consider it there.