

Session 8

April 19, 2020

Unit 2: Jesus Encounters . . .

The Money Changers at the Temple

Jesus is the focus of authentic worship.

The Word

John 2:13-25

Engage the Word

TROUBLE AT THE TEMPLE

John 2:13-17

Jesus went “up to Jerusalem,” is a recurring phrase (more than 20 times) in the New Testament. Jerusalem, in the Judean hills, meant a person would travel physically “up” to the city. The word “up” may also have a theological nuance. Travel to Jerusalem was a pilgrimage to the heart of Jewish faith.

This visit may have come near the end of Jesus’ earthly life. The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) each report a cleansing of the temple just days before Jesus’ crucifixion. But in John it is quite early. Did John position this episode early for theological emphasis to highlight the opposition Jesus would continually face from “the Jews” (more on them later)?

Some people attempt to keep both the Synoptic accounts of the conflict (as happening during Jesus’ last week) and John’s (in contrast, near the beginning of Jesus’ ministry) in their reconstruction, arguing for two cleansing of the temple events. But no gospel reports two temple conflicts. Each gospel gives important space to a single dramatic cleansing of the temple (Matthew 21:12–17, Mark 11:15–19, and Luke 19:45–48). This session draws primarily upon John’s account.

Jesus saw “the temple courts” (probably the Court of the Gentiles) being used as a “market” (the Greek word shapes the English word “emporium”). Jesus bristled with anger. Taking a “whip” to some merchants and their operations, He drove the offenders out. Only John mentions the whip (Latin “flagellum”), which was sometimes used to drive animals. On occasion it was an

instrument of torture, with small pieces of metal and bone attached to the cords. These could rip the flesh of the one being whipped. The more subdued sense, driving animals or people in a certain direction, is probably meant. Jesus made a whip and acted to right the wrongs He saw. Jesus' anger relates importantly to the temple being the "house" of God. It was also the only part of the complex in which God-fearing Gentiles could gather for worship.

Because the sacrificial system required many animals, Jesus' objection may have been more about the location of the sales, rather than the selling and buying itself. Perhaps He took offense at amounts charged by the vendors. Jesus seems to have cooperated with payments to support the temple (Matthew 17:24-27). The money changers did provide a necessary service, exchanging a variety of money for the acceptable half shekel of Tyre (Exodus 30:11-16).

The disciples remembered Jesus' teaching based on Psalm 69:9. Only John includes this Old Testament verse. The Old Testament passage looks back on what had happened. The zeal "has consumed" (NRSV). But John 2:17 has a future tense reading, "will consume me," giving the psalm a predictive aspect. Jesus' "zeal" for His "Father's house" would be a passion that will "eat at him" ? throughout His ministry. Also, by employing the Greek perfect tense (2:17) John essentially says "it remains written." ? The long ago word from God stood true in Jesus' time, and will stand throughout the ages to come.

SIGNS AND MISUNDERSTANDING

John 2:18-22

Many times the opponents of Jesus are called "the Jews." John uses the phrase some 30 times. On occasion "the Jews" are people who did not understand Jesus (about half the usages). Sometimes "the Jews" were violently opposed to Jesus. Near the end of John, "King of the Jews" is a term of derision (18:39), and the judgment attached to Jesus' cross (19:19). Jesus was Jewish, and all His early followers were as well. John was not placing all Jews in the enemy category. Rather, John points out the significant resistance of some Jewish leaders, an opposition that eventually led them to call for Jesus' death.

Critical misunderstanding happens in 2:19-21. Is the temple a building, or is it Jesus' body? Exaggerated irony—"three days" versus "forty-six years" demonstrates the inability of the Jewish leaders to understand Jesus. Even the most devoted disciples needed a post-resurrection faith to understand "the Scripture" and Jesus' words. Jesus spoke of His body, not a stone and timbers structure. (Similar is John 1:51.) There Jesus ("the Son of Man") is like the stairway that connected the heavenly and the earthly (Genesis 28:12). With Christ's coming, "Bethel," (Genesis 28:19) the house of God, would be not a place, but encountered in a person. Jesus identified himself with the "temple," the connecting point of God the Father and an assembly of worshipers. Announcing himself as "temple," Jesus anticipated His resurrection and prepared disciples then and since for a celebration after "three days."

BELIEF AND TRUST

John 2:23-25

Another key term is “sign” or “signs.” The singular and plural forms combined total nearly 20 instances. These begin at 2:11 and continue to 20:30. A careful study of “signs” in John’s gospel will point the reader to various levels of faith demonstrated in the characters. Signs, for some, led to lasting faith as disciples. They believed the Scripture and Jesus’ words. Many believed in Jesus’ name. The same foundational Greek word translated “entrust,” indicates that Jesus did not fully give himself to those with only a limited faith. A more developed belief, a resurrection faith that brought one into ongoing discipleship, was needed.

Did You Know?

Jesus’ anger is kindled because of the peoples’ idolatry. They had taken the place of God and turned it into something else. Jesus quite forcefully reminds them His kingdom is not about turning a profit. Today, the church must avoid those things that turn a house of worship into a mere marketplace.

Did You Know?

Important events in Jesus’ life and ministry tended to happen around the time of Passover. Note the temple would have been quite crowded when Jesus drove the money changers out.

Reflect

What aspects of today’s scripture identify barriers to Jesus-centered worship? Which are the most challenging to you?

Rick Williamson is a Professor Emeritus of Biblical Literature at Mount Vernon Nazarene University. A retired elder, he has been a pastor and a chaplain.