

014 John 1:13-25 Jesus cleanses the Temple

The second Temple was built (c.516BC) after the destruction of Solomon's Temple (586BC) and it stood until 70AD, when Jerusalem was sacked by the Romans. Herod the Great (c.73BC-4BC) built massive extensions, so the Second Temple was also known as Herod's Temple. It was said, "He who has not seen Herod's building, never saw a beautiful building." It was a building of magnificence. The 46 years (John 2:20) most likely refers to the time it took to do the extensions.

Though outwardly beautiful, the Jews/Judeans who administered worship were in a state of apostasy (see Isaiah 29:13-14). When Jesus went up to Jerusalem He faced a religious system devoid of spiritual life. This contrasts with the wedding at Cana. In John, Galilee is the region where Jesus is received, but the Jews of Jerusalem did not accept Him (cf John 1:11-12). (See the separate sheet to compare and contrast these two stories.) When Jesus saw humility and faith in people, He responded (e.g. in Cana in Galilee). When met with sceptical questioning (e.g. in Jerusalem) He did not, though He spoke of His resurrection. Where are we spiritually? Are we open to the Lord and ready to heed Mary's advice, *do whatever He tells you*? Or do we come to God with a sceptical heart. If the latter is the case, then the Lord wants us to humble ourselves and realise we will only get answers when we come to God on His terms and not ours.

In the early church nearly all the believers were Jewish or Gentile God-fearers who had links with the synagogue. They hardly needed to be told that the Passover was Jewish! (John 2:13). But John has to say it was *the Passover of the Jews* because there were other Passovers. For example, the Samaritans, who didn't acknowledge the legitimacy of the Jerusalem Temple, followed their own calendar. 1st century Judaism wasn't united. We could compare this with the Eastern Orthodox Church which celebrates Christmas on 6th January. Jesus was Judean, so He kept the Passover of the Jews. Jesus therefore validated the calendar (John 4:22), but He did not validate what was going on there! Temple worship had been turned into a market (John 2:14-16, and see Isaiah 1:14-17).

There wasn't anything wrong with the festival of Passover itself. After all, God had established His festivals (Leviticus 23). But they were supposed to be an expression of love and worship, not the love of money. Temple worship had in effect become a money making machine in a religious guise ... which may sound familiar ... the prosperity teachers come to mind.

After Jesus cleaned the temple, the disciples remembered it was written, *Zeal for your house will consume me* (John 2:17). They were beginning to put 2 and 2 together. Then the Jewish leaders demanded a sign: *show us* (John 2:18). The emphasis should be placed on the 'us'. They expected any candidate for Messiah to submit themselves to *them*, as the religious authorities, for approval. This Jesus point blank refused to do. Why should He? If it is true that *all things were made through Him*, why should He submit to any religious authorities for approval? Jesus will refuse to jump to our demands for a sign. On the other hand if we come to Him in humility and submission, then it is a very different story. We need to bow at His feet, not the other way round.

The Jews were incredulous when Jesus said He would destroy the Temple and raise it in three days. They exclaimed, "*It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?*" (John 2:20). They didn't get it, and Jesus didn't see the need to explain further (cf Mark 3:6). But John fills us the reader in, *But he was speaking about the temple of his body* (John 2:21).

In John's gospel there is a paradigm shift in the focus of worship from the Temple to Jesus Himself. Believers are part of His body and therefore also the Temple of God's Spirit (1Corinthians 3:16). The

cleansing of the Temple is in all four gospels, but the synoptic gospels focus on Israel's failure to be a light to the nations (e.g. Mark 11:17)¹. In John the focus is on the purity of the Temple (John 2:16). The Temple was intended as a place of worship of God who is holy. But how is it possible to worship a holy God? Psalm 24 tells us, *he who has clean hands and a pure heart*. The trouble is that when we measure ourselves by Biblical standards we quickly realise that there is none with hands (= actions) or heart (= motivations) clean enough to approach a holy God. What we need is for Jesus to cleanse the temple of our hearts. In John 13 Jesus washes His disciple's feet. In John 15 Jesus says, *you are already clean because of the word that I have spoken to you* (John 15:3). It is the living word of God, received and believed on, that cleanses and forgives and saves us (James 1:21). Yet we still need to ask the Lord to wash our 'feet' because we easily pick up a lot of 'dirt and grime' walking in this world.

A few chapters later, in John 7, we find Jesus once more in Jerusalem at the Temple, though this time at the Feast of Tabernacles.

John 7:37-39 *On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'" Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.*

Here again, Jesus is in the Temple. He offered living waters to all who believe, by which He meant the Spirit. Jesus referred to the Scripture which says, *Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water*. The only problem is that it isn't clear which Scripture Jesus is referring to. However Ezekiel 47:1 is one likely candidate,

Ezekiel 47:1 *Then he brought me back to the door of the temple, and behold, water was issuing from below the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east). The water was flowing down from below the south end of the threshold of the temple, south of the altar.*

Ezekiel 47 gives a picture of living waters flowing out from the Temple bringing new life to the parched desert. The parched desert represents the spiritual barrenness of the world. The last chapter in the Bible gives a similar picture,

Revelation 22:1-2 *Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.*

I believe this is a vision of a future Messianic age when Christ comes again. But this Messianic age has already been inaugurated in Jesus' first coming. As we come to Christ and allow Him to be Lord in our lives and in our church, He has promised that living waters will flow out from the Temple, the body of Christ, to bring healing and wholeness through the gospel. This is a wonderful vision of a Christ-centred church.

¹ The synoptic gospels place the cleansing of the Temple in the last week of Jesus' life. John places it at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. One solution is that Jesus cleansed the Temple twice. However there are other examples where the gospel writers do not follow a strict chronology. This is because the genre of the gospels is theological not primarily biographical. The historicity of the gospels can be relied on absolutely. But we need also to recognise that the gospel writers are using their material (under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit) to develop an interpretation of the life and ministry of Jesus. In regard to whether Jesus cleansed the Temple once or twice, I am inclined to think there was just one cleansing, but I don't really know.