

## “Three Days”

### The Ninth in a Series of Sermons on the Gospel of John

*Texts: John 2:13-25; Psalm 69:1-15*

---

If you were a Jew living at the time when Jesus began his messianic mission (about 28 AD), the Jerusalem Temple was the heart and soul of your religion. The temple was built by Solomon. It was destroyed by the Babylonians and then rebuilt by Zerubabel. The so-called “second temple” had been completed forty-six years prior to Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. Everything in Jewish life centered around this magnificent building and the sacrifices offered within it. Upon entering the temple, Jesus is angry at what he finds—merchants and money changers. Because of his zeal for the house of God, Jesus cleanses the temple, driving out those conducting business in the Court of the Gentiles. When confronted by the temple authorities, Jesus implies that the Jerusalem temple will be destroyed, and that he will raise it up in just three days. Jesus was speaking three years in advance of his own death and resurrection, but the temple authorities had no idea what he meant, because he was talking about his own body.

As we continue our series on the Gospel of John, we are now in the second half of chapter 2 (vv. 13-25). We now take up John’s account of Jesus celebrating the Passover in Jerusalem. John the Baptist will fade into the background, because that one greater than John had come and began his messianic ministry exactly as John had foretold. Jesus began calling his first disciples, and then performed his first miracle (sign) at a wedding in Cana near his home town of Nazareth. But in the second half of chapter two the scene shifts yet again as Jesus goes up to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover.

According to John 1:29 and 35, on at least two occasions John the Baptist identified Jesus as “*the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*” The Baptist also identifies Jesus as the Son of God. Understanding that it was time to recede into the background, the Baptist directed two of his own followers (Andrew and John the disciple) to leave him and follow Jesus. Andrew finds his brother (Peter) and tells him that he has met Israel’s Messiah (Jesus). Andrew finds Philip and then Nathanael, and tells them “*we have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth*” (1:45). Nathanael decides to “come and see” for himself, and upon doing so declares of Jesus in verse 49, “*Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!*”

Upon hearing Nathanael’s confession of faith, Jesus says to his new disciples, “*because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree,’ do you believe? You will see greater things than these.’ And he said to him, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man* (John 1:50-51).” In telling the disciples that they will see the same vision Jacob did (Jacob being a great patriarch of Israel whose sons were the founders of Israel’s twelve tribes), Jesus is promising the disciples that they will receive divine confirmation that Jesus is who they think him to be. But Jesus is also informing them in ways they could not yet understand, that they themselves will supercede the twelve tribes of Israel in God’s redemptive purposes.

In chapter two, Jesus and his new disciples attend a wedding at Cana on the seventh day in John’s chronology of the opening days of Jesus’ public ministry. Mary is there, and Jesus is an invited guest. When the hosts run out of wine, Mary approaches Jesus and asks for his help in securing new wine to avoid a potentially embarrassing social *faus pax*. Jesus’ answer to his mother (for whom he is likely providing after the death of Joseph) raises eyebrows at first hearing. “*Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come.*” Jesus is not being rude or impolite, but he is mildly rebuking Mary

because Jesus' messianic ministry is underway and things cannot be like they were before. Jesus' hour has not yet come. Until it does, Jesus must be about his father's work, not his family's.

When Jesus miraculously turns 150 gallons of water into new wine, the disciples witness the first of those greater things which Jesus promised them—John will tell us at the end of his gospel that Jesus performed so many signs and wonders that no one could record them all. As we saw last time, a number of Israel's prophets had foretold that a feast of abundant wine and rich food would symbolically mark the dawn of the messianic age—in other words, there will be joyous feasting as a sign of God's goodness and proof of his faithfulness in keeping his promises. The dawn of the messianic age will be a time of celebration—like at a wedding. When Jesus turns water into wine at Cana, he blesses the bride and groom who have invited him to their wedding with a very expensive gift. He also performs his first miraculous sign, the clearest indication yet that he is everything his new disciples think him to be. This sign indicates that Jesus will usher in the long-promised messianic age as foretold by Israel's prophets.

After the account of our Lord's first miracle, the stage is now set for the second of seven miraculous signs mentioned in this Gospel. Cana is the first, the second is the cleansing of the temple (in chapter 2), and the last in the series of signs (the seventh) occurs when Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead as recounted in John 11. On day seven of John's chronology (spanning John the Baptist's encounter out in the wilderness with the Jews from Jerusalem) to the wedding at Cana, Jesus performed his first sign on the Sabbath creating new wine from water, pointing to the new wine of the new creation, which in turn, points ahead to the marriage supper of Christ the Lamb (Revelation 19). So too, Jesus' seventh sign is the raising of Lazarus, which points to the resurrection of dead on the last day of human history. While we don't want to make too much of these numeric markers, we certainly should not ignore them.

Turning to our text in verse 12 of John 2, we read that “*after this [Jesus] went down to Capernaum, with his mother and his brothers and his disciples, and they stayed there for a few days.*” Capernaum is a fishing village on the north side of the Sea of Galilee. Peter and the other disciples were originally from the nearby village of Bethsaida (“fishtown”), but were now living in Capernaum. Jesus arrives there with Mary (his mother), his half-brothers (his younger brothers, the natural children of Joseph and Mary). In the synoptic gospels we also read of this event—when Jesus and his family relocate from Nazareth to Capernaum (where his messianic mission is centered early in his messianic ministry). Jesus, his family, and his disciples arrive in Capernaum an unspecified period of time after the wedding. The fact that they stayed there “a few days” seems to indicate that it was not long before the events which follow come to pass.

In verse 13, John tells us that “*the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.*” Although Jerusalem is to the south, since Jerusalem is of a higher elevation than Galilee, as well as the center of Israel's religion and history, you “go up” to Jerusalem. The Passover was celebrated on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of Nisan—the full moon of late March or the beginning of April. During the Passover, the Jews commemorated that night when the angel of death struck down the first born male of every household in Egypt—except those who doorposts were smeared with the blood of the sacrificial lamb. The feast of unleavened bread immediately followed, lasting seven days.<sup>1</sup>

The fact that John tells us that Jesus went to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover at the beginning of his messianic mission seems to conflict with the synoptic gospels, which tell us that Jesus' celebration of the Passover culminates in the institution of the Lord's Supper, and then our Lord's betrayal, arrest, and

---

<sup>1</sup> Carson, The Gospel According to John, 176.

crucifixion. Critical scholars—who often dismiss the historicity of the Gospel accounts—tend to argue that John places the cleansing of the temple “story” here for theological purposes, and that since the Gospels reflect the beliefs of the early church and are not interested in what really happened (history), we should not be concerned about such things. But since John is obviously very interested in history—to the point of telling us how many years passed from the completion of the temple until this event takes place (forty-six)—we do need to address why it is that John places this account of the cleansing of the temple at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, while the synoptics seem to place it at the end.

The solution is very simple—Jesus went to Jerusalem at least twice, once at the beginning of his ministry and again at the end.<sup>2</sup> Upon close inspection, this is clearly the case. Recall, that in Jesus’ trial on the night before his crucifixion (as recounted in the synoptic gospels), Jesus was accused of saying that he would destroy the temple. In other words, he was accused of being a terrorist and revolutionary. The event recounted in John 2:12-22, was likely Jesus’ first encounter with the Jewish religious leaders in the temple environs, and the Jewish religious leaders remembered this event when Jesus stood before them three years later (as mentioned in the synoptics). This time (Jesus’ first cleansing of the temple), the encounter ends without Jesus’ arrest. But three years later, after Jesus was well-known and perceived as a threat to the Jewish religious leaders, he was indeed arrested and tried, and this earlier encounter in the temple was raised as evidence against him by the Jewish leaders who remembered it quite well.

In verses 14-16 of John 2, John describes Jesus entering into the temple and driving out those conducting business in the outer court of the temple, the so-called Court of the Gentiles. John tells us that “*in the temple [Jesus] found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there. And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen. And he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. And he told those who sold the pigeons, ‘Take these things away; do not make my Father's house a house of trade.’*” First, we need to consider the role the Jerusalem temple played in Jewish life at the time, and then second, we need to understand why it was that Jesus was so angered by the presence of the merchants and money-changers.

The temple was the historical and religious heart of Judaism. It was hard to imagine Jewish life without it—the reason why contemporary Judaism is so different from biblical Judaism. In addition to the fact that this is where the twice-daily sacrifices of the lambs occurred, the temple was a magnificent building, and a source of Jewish national pride. A Rabbi of the period remarked, “he who has not seen Jerusalem in her splendor has never seen a desirable city in his life. He who has not seen the temple in its full construction has never seen a glorious building in his life.”<sup>3</sup> The Roman historian, Tacitus, describes the temple as “a mountain of white marble decorated with Gold.”<sup>4</sup> The sunlight radiated off the gold sheathing and the temple seemed to shine. Those who saw it, never forgot it. To a Jew, the temple was the White House, Plymouth Rock, Valley Forge, Gettysburg, and Grand Rapids, rolled into one. When Jesus enters the temple, he will once again make plain that a new era in redemptive history has dawned because he has come to his Father’s house.

The oxen, sheep, and pigeons being sold were to be sacrificed in the temple. Since many who came to

---

<sup>2</sup> Carson, The Gospel According to John, 176-178.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in William Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1982), 451.

<sup>4</sup> Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 451.

Jerusalem for the Passover were pilgrims, this was a great convenience. People did not have to bring sacrificial animals with them. They could purchase them upon arrival. At one point, the animals were sold from stalls on the lower slope of the Mount of Olives nearby. But by the time of Jesus, the merchants had moved their stalls into the Court of the Gentiles—that place where pilgrims from Gentile nations could come and worship the true and living God. This meant there was no room for Gentiles in the outer court which was intended for God-fearers to “come and see.” Now they cannot. The merchants have taken over that very area of the temple intended to serve as a witness to the nations.

Given the fact that even Jewish pilgrims came to Jerusalem from many different regions with different coinage, the temple authorities allowed money-changers to set up currency exchanges in the same area as the animal stalls. Pilgrims need to pay the annual temple tax, which went to maintain the building and so the money-changers exchanged Roman or local currency (for a small fee) for the Jewish half-shekel coin needed to pay the annual tax. Jesus is not angry because the Jewish temple authorities made it easy for pilgrims to pay the tax and make sacrifices. He was angry because the Jewish religious leaders had allowed these salesmen to set up shop in the outer court of the temple, profaning it.<sup>5</sup> In righteous anger, Jesus made cord of whips to drive out the animals and those selling them, before turning over the tables of those exchanging money. Jesus cried out “*do not make my Father's house a house of trade.*”

The outer court of the temple can no longer fulfill its true purpose, part of which was to serve as a house of prayer for the Gentiles. Despite the temple’s theological and historical significance, ironically, the temple had now become a stumbling block to Israel. Not only did the Jews of Jesus’ day think that God could not get by without it, but the presence of the temple in Jerusalem was seen as the guarantee of God’s favor. The sad reality was that the people of Israel had long since lost sight of the object of faith—not the temple itself, but that to which the temple pointed—YHWH and his throne in heaven.<sup>6</sup>

According to Matthew’s Gospel (12:6), Jesus would later declare, “*I tell you, something greater than the temple is here*”—namely himself. The temple, and its sacrifices, was intended to point the people of Israel to the coming Messiah and his redemptive work—since Jesus is the true Lamb of God. Once Jesus had come and proclaimed that the kingdom of God was at hand, the temple was rendered obsolete because the true temple had come in his very person.<sup>7</sup> Ironically, the temple now stood in the way of Israel embracing Jesus as the Messiah. Once Jesus had come, the temple was obsolete. It had served its purpose. Jesus himself will replace it. He says as much, here in John 2.

Our Lord is deeply saddened and troubled by what he found. According to verse 17, John (writing this Gospel forty-fifty years after this happened), recounts that “*his disciples [perhaps including himself] remembered that it was written, ‘Zeal for your house will consume me.’*” John does not tell us whether his disciples remembered the words of Psalm 69:9 (part of our Old Testament lesson) when they saw Jesus drive the merchants and money-changers out, or if they recalled this after the resurrection. In Psalm 69, the Psalmist cries out because of his anguish over those not recognizing the true purpose of the temple and its role in the covenant. Jesus’ actions are similar to the Psalmist’s, only the manner in which John and the disciples recall the event indicates that they saw Jesus not as a reformer of Jewish corruption, but as the

---

<sup>5</sup> Carson, The Gospel According to John, 179.

<sup>6</sup> Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 392.

<sup>7</sup> Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 392.

Messiah fulfilling his calling by cleansing the house of YHWH.<sup>8</sup>

Not only does Jesus speak of the temple almost as if it were his, the disciples saw the zeal with which Jesus acts, and how much this sad state of affairs troubled him. John does not tell us when the disciples remembered, but he does tell us of the impact witnessing this had upon them. They had just seen the second sign of God's glory. Jesus had just cleansed the temple. The lament of Jeremiah 7:9-11 had just been repeated before their very eyes. *"Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, 'We are delivered!'—only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, I myself have seen it, declares the Lord."*

After Jesus drove out the merchants and turned over the tables of the money-changers, it was not long before he was confronted. We read in verse 18 *"so the Jews said to him, 'What sign do you show us for doing these things?'"* The temple authorities were demanding a sign to prove that Jesus had the authority to enter the temple and act as he did. Policing the temple was the responsibility of the priests and Levites and given what Jesus did, the demand for a sign is appropriate. They are not concerned with why Jesus did what he did, only that Jesus acted rashly and without their permission. Because Jesus was not immediately arrested, and was instead asked for a sign, suggests that the manner in which Jesus drove out the merchants made it clear he was not someone in a blind rage, or mentally ill, or a revolutionary. The request for "a sign" will prove whether or not he is sent from God.

Jesus will not "perform" signs on command. Instead, he confounds his questioners by promising a sign completely beyond their comprehension. *"Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.'" If taken literally, Jesus' question is almost a dare—destroy this temple [i.e. the Jerusalem temple] and I will rebuild it in three days. There was no way, of course, this would happen. But the Jewish authorities do not know what to say, and they stumble for a response in verse 20. "The Jews then said, 'It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?'"*

Jesus' answer completely throws them off, as they had no idea what he was talking about. This is by design. Speaking in prophetic idiom (as a prophet) is a form of judgment upon those who would not believe in him even when Jesus does perform miraculous signs in their presence. But John tells us precisely what Jesus meant. *"But he was speaking about the temple of his body."* As the truth incarnate, and the light which shines in the darkness, in John's account Jesus is already showing himself to be that one predicted in the law of Moses, in the holy institutions of Israel (i.e., the sacrifices and the temple), and the prophetic expectations of the messianic age. Jesus is not only the Lamb of God, he is also the true temple of God, who will die for our sins and then be raised from the dead three days later.<sup>9</sup> Although the Jewish religious leaders and even his own disciples missed the point of his words, Jesus has just told everyone listening that he is the true temple, that he will die, that he will be raised, and that the Jerusalem temple is about to be superseded in God's redemptive purposes.

As we learn in verse 22, the disciples only fully understood this event when looking back upon it later. *"When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken."* Although they already professed their faith in

---

<sup>8</sup> Morris, The Gospel According to John, 196.

<sup>9</sup> Ridderbos, The Gospel of John, 120.

Jesus (when they began following Jesus) at this early stage in Jesus' ministry, the disciples had little understanding—unlike how they would view this event three years later *after* Jesus was raised from the dead. The disciples would also evaluate this event in light of all those messianic prophecies which Jesus explained to them throughout the three-year course of his messianic mission. Those who put Jesus to death on Good Friday will also remember this event, accusing Jesus of saying he would destroy the temple and then rebuild it within three days. The only place where Jesus made such a statement (although distorted at his trial) is here, when he challenged the temple authorities.<sup>10</sup> This almost certainly proves that Jesus cleansed the temple twice, once at the beginning of ministry and again at the end.

Although John and the other gospel writers give us none of the specifics, John does tell us that Jesus was performing additional miraculous signs while in Jerusalem during the Passover. “*Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing.*” Although John tells us that many of those witnessing these miracles “believed,” apparently, this was not genuine or “saving” faith (which is trust in Jesus), but perhaps something more like flattery, or some sort of an acknowledgment that Jesus was a miracle worker and perhaps even the messiah.<sup>11</sup> But this “faith” was fleeting and not necessarily genuine.

We know this to be the case because of what Jesus says in verses 24-25. “*But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.*” Jesus knew what the people who witnessed these miracles did not. His messianic ministry was just beginning. There were three more years before his hour comes.

Jesus knew that the people of Galilee will flock to him because they see him as a miracle worker. There will be attempts to make him king. Many of those most eager for the Messiah to come, were far more interested in the Messiah leading them to victory over Rome than in seeking God's forgiveness of their sin. Because there is much yet to be done, Jesus refused to accept their accolades and flattery merely because they saw him perform signs and wonders which prove that he is from God and that in him God's glory is being revealed. Jesus knew that as the light began to shine in the darkness, “*his own people [will] not receive him.*” He knew that many of those who “believed” this day, would be among the crowds shouting “crucify him” three years later. Jesus knew the hearts of people were evil—he knew what is in us. Sin. Self-interest. Darkness. Jesus did not entrust himself to them. He knows us too well.

When Jesus entered the temple and drives out the merchants and money-changers we see his zeal for his father's house. But he is not merely a zealot—he is the Messiah. We also see that from the beginning of his messianic mission, Jesus knew he would suffer and die for our sins (despite knowing what is in our hearts), and that after three days, he would rise again from the dead. Jesus knew this because he was the eternal word made flesh, the Son of God, who veiled his glory so that he might save us from our sins. And so when Jesus says “*destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up,*” we see that he is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, and the true temple of God. On that day his identity was veiled. But looking back, his disciples believed *the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.*

Do you?

---

<sup>10</sup> Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 180-181.

<sup>11</sup> Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 184.