

In the beginning

Part 3 - Jesus' actions in the Temple take us back to the beginning

Very early on in Jesus' ministry, soon after he changed the water into wine, "he went down to Capernaum (from Cana, a five hour walk) with his mother and brothers and his disciples," where "they stayed for a few days," **John 2:12**.

Then John rather casually writes in **verse 13**, "When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem." The distance from Capernaum to Jerusalem, however, is 79 miles, or 126 kilometres. That's a four day trip on foot, and back then there was no water or toilet facilities along the way either - and being Passover time the road would have been clogged with travelers too, so it was probably very slow going.

When Jesus and his disciples finally got to Jerusalem, which they had to do as good Jews three times a year (Deuteronomy 16:16), they went to the Temple, where "In the temple courts," **verse 14**, Jesus "found men selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money."

But why would money need to be exchanged at the Temple in the first place? Because this was Passover time, and every Jewish male had to pay a half shekel temple tax (Exodus 30:13) in the temple's own currency, and that required changing their Roman and Greek coins into temple coins. That was nuisance enough, but far more annoying was the hefty fee being charged by the money-changers for the coin exchange, and with one million Jews in the city for Passover every year huge profits were being made for the Temple treasury.

The other source of loot for the Temple treasury was the supply of 'priest-approved' animals for the Passover sacrifices. Hundreds, and possibly thousands, of animals were penned up in the Court of the Gentiles at the Temple in case a family didn't have an animal to sacrifice, or they brought an animal that had a blemish. If the priest found some trifling imperfection in the family owned animal he could reject their animal and require the purchase of a 'priest-approved' animal instead - and again at a hugely inflated price - no matter how poor the family was. It was blatant extortion, but done with the approval of the priesthood, and inside the Temple grounds too.

How ironic, that at the very time of year when the Jews had spotlessly cleaned their homes of all leaven, and the whole city of Jerusalem had been cleansed, the Temple, the centre of Jewish life and God's presence on Earth, was a rancid mess of greed, hypocrisy, and total disdain for what the Passover pictured.

It did not go unnoticed by many Jews either, who were fed up with what was happening at the Temple. But no one, it seems, had the courage to do anything about it - until, that is, Jesus turned up on the scene. On seeing the animals packed into the Temple court, and people haggling and shouting over ridiculously inflated fees, Jesus grabbed some leather cords used for tethering animals, braided them into a whip, **verses 15-16**, "and chased the animals and the money-changers out of the temple area, scattering their coins and overturning their tables. And to those selling doves, he yelled, 'Get this lot out of here. How dare you turn my Father's house into a market.'"

At which point, the whole system came to a halt, because with the animals scampering off the sacrifices would be held up until the animals were captured again. It was the first hint of the Temple and its sacrificial system coming to an end. But no one cottoned on that this is what Jesus had done, nor did anyone connect his actions with the prophecy in **Malachi 3:1-3**, that the Messiah would "suddenly come to his Temple....like a refiner's fire and a launderer's soap....to purify the Levites." What Jesus had just done, in other words, was a direct fulfillment of prophecy, and it clearly identified him as the Messiah as well.

The only people who **did** see any significance in what Jesus had just done were his disciples, because as they watched Jesus flailing away with his whip chasing off the animals and overturning tables a verse from Psalm 69 popped into their minds (in **John 2:17**) - "His disciples remembered that it is written: '**Zeal for your house will consume me.**'"

But why on earth would that verse come to mind? Well, for starters, it was that time of year when the Jews had cleaned out every little piece of leaven from their homes, and here was Jesus doing the very same thing in **GOD'S home**. Jesus was cleaning out God's house with the same fervour and zeal that King David felt for God's house in Psalm 69. But in Psalm 69:7-12 it was **also** David's zeal for God that stirred up **huge resistance** against him, and it was tearing him apart. It was "consuming" him. So there was also a hint in that verse that came to the disciples' minds of **JESUS' zeal consuming him too**, because of the resistance and fury he would bring on himself by what he'd just done in the Temple.

But imagine the fury we'd bring on ourselves from Christians if we stood up and said that Christianity today is merely a reflection of the culture, because it's operating by worldly methods and in its doctrines it's turning people into selfish, fearful, dehumanized robots. In other words, Christianity doesn't remotely reflect God or his purpose for humanity, and it needs to dump the mess it has become into an incinerator and start afresh with what God created us for in the first place. Imagine the reaction if we said that.

But that's what Jesus just said in the Temple. "How dare you turn my Father's house into a market," he yelled. He was shaming the ruling priesthood for being an embarrassment to their calling and bringing scorn on the Temple. And in their blatant greed for money the priests couldn't care less how the Gentiles arriving at the Temple felt when they found their very own Court of the Gentiles stuffed with animals and money tables, noise and mess, and fat priests rubbing their hands with glee at the loot they were raking in.

Jesus, in other words, was exposing the entire system for the dead, useless, corrupt mess it had become. And he went right to the heart of the matter too by heading straight for the Temple, the place where God's presence could be 'felt' and humans could communicate with him. The Temple was also the place where God's priests represented and reflected everything the true God stood for, and where God's purpose for humanity was made clear and attractive. This was where Israel's God and his plan could become known, and it was supposed to be so inviting and beautiful it would draw people from all nations to it, just like it did in the days of Solomon.

One of the first jobs that Jesus did as the Messiah, therefore, was clean out the Temple, and in particular the area where **the Gentiles** could participate in the sacrifices and establish a connection with Israel's God too. This was what the Temple and its Court of the Gentiles was for, but instead its caretakers had turned it into a market for ripping off the innocent. It created a horrible picture of God, and Jesus was furious.

What Jesus' disciples were witnessing with their own eyes, therefore, was God's fury at those he'd chosen to represent him as his priests not doing their job. It was the disciples' first glimpse of the radical change Jesus was bringing about in the Temple and **in those who would be its priests in the future**. The Scripture that came to the disciples' minds, therefore, was an indication of **their OWN future** too, that "zeal for God's house" would consume them as well.

What that verse in **Psalm 69** would mean for Jesus' disciples, therefore, was exactly what it meant when David first wrote it, that **uncompromising zeal for representing God properly** stirs up "scorn" from people (7), "alienation" by members of one's own family (8), "insults" (9), and "people making sport" of us (11). And it hurts, just as it hurt David, because it feels like we're bringing shame to God's name rather than glory (6) - and it also hurts us personally (verses 1-4), because it isn't pleasant being picked on and ridiculed.

But it was this Psalm that came to the disciples' minds when watching Jesus clean out the mess in the Court of the Gentiles. He was zealous all right, but he was also stepping into a minefield of trouble at the hands of those he was exposing. I wonder how much the disciples realized that this was the life **they'd** be facing too, then, in the new priesthood and new Temple that Jesus would be setting up in the future.

Well, here WE are today AS that new priesthood and new Temple, being inspired by the same Spirit, and having this picture of Jesus in the Temple bringing Psalm 69 to **our** minds too. And one thing becomes clear, that God isn't putting up with nonsense from his Temple priesthood, which must come as a shock to those who only see Jesus as loving and gentle, because in the Temple he wasn't loving and gentle at all. He was angry and violent, just like the 'tough old God' of the Old Testament. Clearly the God of old hadn't changed his ways; he could still be angry and tough when needs be in the **New** Testament too.

As his disciples, therefore, we grasp this picture of Jesus too. Yes it's true that Jesus loves us and understands us, just as he loved and understood the corrupt priests in the Temple (Matthew 23:37) - BUT - we also have this striking picture of Jesus braiding a whip when the priests thought they had a good thing going using the Temple for their own selfish purposes.

Jesus was furious. He wasn't out of control, because he took the time to braid several cords together, but he wasn't afraid of the reaction and fallout either. God's house was a mess, and so were the people who were supposed to be looking after it, and to Jesus that was utterly unacceptable. When it comes to the Temple, therefore, in any age, expect Jesus to clean it out with the same zeal he displayed in cleaning out the Court of the Gentiles in his day, because **the reason for God's Temple** hasn't changed.

The Temple is still the only place on Earth where people of all nations see the attributes, the character, and the holiness of God, so it's obvious why God is angry when the only place where people can come to know him is a mess as well.

And since WE are now that Temple and the priests in it, we can expect Jesus to make his presence felt with us too, just as he did at the Temple in Jerusalem. But it wasn't his purpose to injure or hurt. The animals and money he scattered could be retrieved, and he told those with doves to remove the cages with the birds still inside, rather than the cages being broken open and the birds flying away. So Jesus' anger didn't cause loss. That wasn't his purpose. His purpose was to cleanse, to get rid of the problem messing up the Temple, because the Temple was God's drawing card to the people round about, just as it was in Solomon's day. **Without God's Temple and God's priesthood there isn't anything on this planet to draw people to the true God and what he's really like.**

What people from other nations visiting Jerusalem would have seen in Jesus' actions, therefore, was a NEW Temple and new priesthood in the making that included the Gentiles as equals. The old era of the Jews alone being God's chosen people was being done away, because they had failed in their duties as God's representatives. That's quite a warning to those claiming they represent God today - and especially to those who are raking in millions by exploiting people just like the priests in the Temple exploited people in Jesus' day - that Jesus is very aware of what they're doing and he will deal with them.

Watching Jesus with his whip in the Temple got the point across to anyone representing God (or **would be** representing him in future) that there comes a point when Jesus moves in. He may delay things for a while, but his zeal for God's house still consumes him as much as ever, and he will deal with blatant hypocrisy, compromise and bad habits in those representing God.

Jesus loves us and he's enormously patient and merciful, but we know that already. That's what attracted us to God, knowing that despite all our problems he loved us and in his Son died for us. But we ALSO know that he's cleaning us up for **other people's sakes** now too. To resist his broom, or turn a blind eye to habits we know are wrong, or exploit his patience to continue with bad habits, doesn't stop Jesus loving us, but to those who claimed to be his priesthood in Jerusalem who blissfully ignored their problems he issued a strong warning in **Matthew 23:38-39**, that "your house is left to you desolate, and you will not see me again until you welcome the one God sent to you."

Jesus said he was 'hands-off' in their lives until they were ready to accept what he'd been sent to them for. And that prophecy came true 40 years later when "your house" - meaning that entire corrupt system that the Jewish religious leaders had created - was totally destroyed along with the Temple itself in 70 AD. They had 40 years after Jesus was resurrected to accept the error of their ways, and they did not, so Jesus unleashed his fury again, this time wiping out the Temple as well.

And again, here **we** are as God's Temple and priesthood now, so should we expect any gentler treatment when we put on a great outward show of being religious like the Pharisees - but we can't forgive people, we don't pay tax if we can get away with it, and we condemn politicians? And should we be surprised when hiding an obvious moral problem that instead of experiencing peace of mind there's a constant niggling and very unpleasant tension in our heads that won't ease up? And perhaps, to our embarrassment and dismay, "That which is done in secret is shouted from the rooftops" (Luke 12:3), when our problem becomes too obvious to hide anymore.

Perhaps then we understand what the disciples understood watching Jesus clear out the money-changers - about the '**consuming**' part of Jesus' zeal for God's Temple. Jesus cares deeply about the condition of the Temple, and his zeal hasn't diminished one bit in clearing out the clutter and noise messing it up. And his **reason** for cleaning it up hasn't changed either: It's for the sake of other people and the picture of God that THEY are getting from his church, just as he cleared out the clutter and noise in the Court of the Gentiles for the Gentiles' sake.

It was this quote from another minister's reading of John 2:17 that really hit me, therefore. Here it is: "Understand that the God to whom you have come, that loving, healing Lord with the warm, accepting and understanding eyes who touches you with forgiveness and cleansing is nevertheless unwilling to put up with the continuance of sin; he will cleanse his Temple whether you like it or not. Hebrews tells us that if the Father loves us he will scourge us and chasten us out of his love until we begin to be what he designed us to be (Hebrews 12:5-7, 12:11). Some get upset at God for this. We feel he ought to settle for what **we** think is holy enough, but he does not. He has in mind a Temple where he can be glorified, where our deepest human desires will find satisfaction and fulfillment, and that requires cleansing. He will bring that about."

But how did the priests react when Jesus took the whip to **their** Temple to bring that about? Well, the first thing they said in **John 2:18** was, “What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?”

What utter hypocrisy, demanding proof that Jesus was the real deal when they themselves were the biggest fakes in the business. They dressed up in all their robes and looked like they were genuinely doing their job as priests in the Temple, but in reality they were exploiting the Temple to feed their own desires for power and money.

And Jesus had just exposed them for the utter fakes that they were. So what did the priests do in return? They distracted attention off themselves and onto Jesus, demanding a sign to prove that HE was genuine. What **Jesus had just done**, though, WAS a sign. Before their very eyes he'd just fulfilled a prophecy in Malachi, AND it was a prophecy that **proved his authority as the Messiah** too.

It meant nothing to the priests, however, so Jesus gave them another sign in **verse 19**: “Destroy this Temple, and I will raise it again in three days.”

Now that **would** be a miraculous sign if Jesus could rebuild in three days what had taken 46 years to construct (verse 20). But it seemed like a silly way of proving his authority, because who would dare destroy the Temple to find out if Jesus **could** actually rebuild it in three days? It didn't make any sense.

But it certainly made sense to Jesus' disciples after Jesus was resurrected from the dead (22). And to all his disciples ever since it has made sense too, **verse 21**, that “the Temple he had spoken of was his body.” Destroy his body, therefore, and he would raise it up three days later, referring of course to his death and resurrection. **But** if that was ALL he meant, why didn't he say, “Destroy this BODY of mine and I'll raise it up in three days?” That would be miraculous enough, yes, but Jesus went one step further when he said, “Destroy this **TEMPLE**...”

Jesus was calling his OWN BODY “the Temple” - which now became the second hint he dropped that the old system was on the way out. The first hint was bringing the sacrificial system at the Temple to a halt when he scattered the animals, and now this, that the word ‘Temple’ would no longer mean the Temple building in Jerusalem, it would mean HIM. In his own body, therefore, he was replacing that entire fake system. Now IN HIM the world would see what a **genuine representation (and human image-bearer) of God looked like**.

What a shocker that must have been for those Jews, and probably for many Christians today too, discovering that God doesn't want buildings, he wants bodies. It's in **people** that God designed his glory to be known, not in great cathedrals or temples that look impressive but cost huge amounts in man-hours and money to build - AND which contradict what Paul said in **Acts 17:24** that God "doesn't live in temples built by human hands." God never ordered a temple to be built. He had the tabernacle made, but that was a tent, not a building.

It was God's plan from the beginning to manifest his divine power through humans. That's what he designed us for in the beginning, and Paul brings that right up to date in **1 Corinthians 6:19**, "that **your body** is a temple of the Holy Spirit." It's in our bodies that we "glorify God," **verse 20**. This is where God's beautiful and genuine Temple on Earth now resides, in all those who are part of Jesus' very own Spirit-filled body, the Church.

That being the case, where do you think Jesus is concentrating his consuming zeal for God's house now? Obviously on the present Temple, the Church, and members of his own body, because it's through this NEW Temple and new priesthood that God is being properly revealed to the world. With that in mind, what might Jesus be concentrating his zeal on **most** in the Church, then?

Well, what stirred Jesus up most at the Temple in Jerusalem was the sickening hypocrisy of it all, of priests appearing to be genuine but were utter fakes, and the wretched impression of God they were giving to the Gentiles. And that's the note this episode at the Temple **ends on** too, as we see in **John 2:23-25**, that during this time when Jesus "was in Jerusalem at the Passover feast, many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing and believed in his name. **But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men.**"

Very early on in his ministry Jesus not only saw how fake the priests were, but also how fake people could be too. They were impressed enough by his miracles to believe he was the real deal, yes, but Jesus could see right through them - just as he'd seen right through the priests' little game at the Temple. He could see that they were only in it for themselves. And no way was he committing himself to people he knew weren't genuine, just as he was "hands-off" in Matthew 23 with people who weren't genuinely living what **they** claimed to be either.

What a shock that must be for disciples in any age, that Jesus can tell a fake from a mile off, and he's only working with those who are genuine.

What his disciples witnessed at this incident in the Temple, therefore, was Jesus' zeal being concentrated on cleansing out everything fake in those representing God, and taking a whip to anything in them that gave a lousy picture of God to other people. As one Christian minister wrote: "We are dealing with a God of reality, a God who cannot be fooled, a God who will always deal in loving forgiveness with anyone who does not defend his evil. When we admit it, and we come asking to be cleansed and freed, he never turns us away, and he never deals with us harshly. But when we come justifying our actions, excusing them, fooling ourselves, we find him refusing to commit himself to us."

And the reason we seek cleansing is our zeal for God's house, that the part we play in his Temple properly represents him to others, because we're the only true picture of God they've got in this world. And that takes us **right back to the beginning** and what God created Adam and Eve for, that in God's great Temple, the heavens and the earth, they, Adam and Eve, were **his first little images** representing and illustrating him. And notice how quickly God tests Adam and Eve to see how genuine THEY are. Are **they totally consumed by his purpose for them**, or are they easily drawn into using his creation for their own ends, just like the priests used the Temple for their own ends too?

I can see why David, despite all his faults, was a man after God's own heart, because when he realized he wasn't consumed by God's purpose for his life he cried out to God to clean him up. And notice his **reason** for asking too: "Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin," he cried in **Psalms 51:2**, **BECAUSE, verse 13**, "Then I will teach transgressors your ways and sinners will be converted to you." He wasn't asking to be cleansed for his own sake, but for the picture of God that his life gave to others.

Here was the proof that David was genuine - he was consumed by God's purpose for his life, of representing God so well and so accurately that he begged God to clean out anything in his life that gave a wrong impression of God to others. "Shape a **Genesis week** from the chaos of my life" is how The Message phrases David's plea to God in **verse 10**. In other words, would God do the same in David as he did **in the beginning** in the seven days of creation, when God cleansed the heavens and the earth from their "tohu and bohu" state, and reformed the Earth as his Temple and dwelling place.

It's back to the beginning, then, that this episode of Jesus in the Temple takes us, to what God created us humans for in the first place, to be image-bearers of him to the rest of his creation, and to be consumed with zeal for that purpose.