

John 2:13-22 – He Turned the Tables¹

Before the lesson – Make copies of the handout, Cleansing the Temple, to be used in the Transformational Exercise.

Fellowship question: (Use *one* of these to break the ice, to begin some discussion, and to lead into the study):

In your experience with renovation or new construction, what was the projected time of completion on a project compared to the actual time of completion?

What is the largest worship space (church, temple, etc.) you have ever visited?

Information

The Washington DC National Cathedral is a large, beautiful space for worship. According to the Cathedral's website, "On January 24, 1791, President George Washington commissioned Major Pierre L'Enfant to create a visionary plan for the nation's capital. It was L'Enfant who first imagined 'a great church for national purposes.' Not until a century later did plans for building Washington National Cathedral gain momentum."

In 1893, Congress authorized its construction. "The longest-running construction project in Washington, D.C., history officially began on September 29, 1907, when workmen laid the Cathedral's foundation stone. President Theodore Roosevelt and the Bishop of London spoke to a crowd of ten thousand.... After Bethlehem Chapel opened for services in 1912, the Cathedral quickly became a place for services of national focus, even as it remained under construction." In 1990, "the completion of the west towers marked the end of 83 years of construction."²

Eighty-three years is a long time! But there it stands now, a magnificent building honoring a majestic God.

The Temple that Jesus visited in Jerusalem, likewise, took a long time to build. According to the ancient historian Josephus, construction began in the eighteenth year of the rule of Herod the Great (20/19 BC) and concluded under Herod Agrippa II in 64 AD. Again, over 80 years.

The Temple with its courtyard was a large space, approximately thirty-seven acres all surrounded by a columned portico. [See an image here:

<http://mikeanderson.net/recuthies/Images/Temple%20diagram.jpg>]

¹ This lesson is copyrighted by Dr. Rick Jordan, Great Bible Teachers, Inc, 2023. More lessons may be found at greatbibleteachers.com.

² <http://www.cathedral.org/about/timeline.shtml>

In today's story, Jesus is joining thousands of other Jews in the sacred pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem for the Passover.

- Have a class member read John 2:13-17.

This story is in all four Gospels. In John, this story takes place at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, just after he calls his first four disciples and performs his first miracle. In the other three gospels, this story takes place on the Monday of the last week of Jesus' life.

This serves as a reminder that the gospels are not biographies of Jesus, nor are they historically constructed in our modern way of thinking or writing. Each of the gospel writers had his own audience and his own way of persuading readers to know and to follow Jesus. For example, as John begins this passage, how does he refer to the time of the year? ("The Passover of the Jews.") Do you have to explain to a Jewish audience that the Passover was a Jewish festival? (No.) So, who is John's audience? (mostly non-Jews)

Thus far, John's story, in brief, is this: "There was a man who had charisma and leadership. People followed him. And, he had power over nature. He could even turn water into wine."

So far, you are probably intrigued by this man. If his wine is as good as the steward of the wedding said, you might already be tempted to follow him. Then, John tells this story about Jesus chasing merchants from a house of worship.

Imagine you are a Gentile (non-Jew) hearing about Jesus for the first time. What might be your first impressions about this man, knowing no other stories about him yet?

Here are some facts about the Temple and the Temple tax to keep in mind:

- The temple was a sacred place set aside for holy worship.
- The courts were outside of the temple proper and were probably where the animals and the money changers were – most probably under the sheltered walkways.
- Because of the hatred against Rome and its coinage that bore Caesar's image, the temple leaders would not accept Roman coinage. Yet, they were not allowed by the Roman government to issue their own currency for the temple tax.
- The tax was to be paid with coins from the city of Tyre (approximately 100 miles north of Jerusalem), thus the exchange of coinage was necessary.
- Animals to be sacrificed were required to be spotless and unbruised. Because of the risk of injury on a long journey and/or for convenience, animals fit for sacrifice were sold to pilgrims in Jerusalem.

Some interpreters of the Bible have tried to find evidence of financial abuse by the temple authorities and the money changers. However, one error is "the insistence that Jesus objected to the 'temple domination system' that overtaxed the population... Thus we have the common stereotype that the 'money changers' were overcharging pilgrims. Jesus never makes this

charge...Nor have we evidence that the Temple oppressed the peasants or overtaxed them...The ‘den of robbers’ [Not used by John but used in Mt.21:13] is a quotation from the Hebrew Bible from Jer. 7:11, and it refers not to where people steal, but where thieves go to feel safe.”³

It seems like this is a system with which everyone is comfortable. It is a win-win. The pilgrims did not have to worry about traveling with a sacrificial animal that could become sick or damaged on the route. The Temple leaders were providing a service to pilgrims without acknowledging the lordship of Caesar. Why, then, is Jesus upset?

The problem is, the focus shifted from the worship of God to the preparations and the activities around the worship. For example, the Passover was a huge family reunion. The focus for some may have been on seeing family and friends. We might compare our celebration of Easter. Is our focus on celebrating the resurrected Jesus? Or, is it on what we will wear, who we will see, egg hunts, Easter baskets, etc? Nothing is wrong with any of things - unless they cause us to gloss over the main thing, worship.

Is it possible that we are “too comfortable” with our religious rituals? If Jesus were to examine our spiritual exercises (or lack of them), how might he react? (He might clean out anything that smacked of greed, oppression, prejudice, etc. He might close down “Christian” organizations/web pages/television shows that misrepresent his teachings, etc.)

Jesus was an amazing strategist. He knew his purpose in life. He knew that eventually he would come to Jerusalem to be crucified. We are not told by John that this was a random, spontaneous act by Jesus. We can imagine that Jesus had this all planned out. For example, this was not just any week, but Passover week, when hundreds of thousands of pilgrims would be present. How might this act have been strategic in Jesus’ ministry?

The “cleansing of the Temple” was not a random act, but a prophetic act. “Prophetic acts were provocative public deeds performed for the sake of what they symbolized, and they are called prophetic acts because they are associated with the prophecies of ancient Israel.”⁴

Jesus’ behavior, in retrospect, reminded the disciples of a passage from Psalm 69. John quotes the first half of the verse, but anyone who knew this psalm would automatically silently quote the rest of the verse, which gave the citation even more power. Listen for the emphasis on shame in this psalm.

- Have a class member read Psalm 69:6-9.

³ Amy-Jill Lavine, “Bearing False Witness: Common Errors Made About Early Judaism”, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament, NRSV*. Edited by Amy-Jill Lavine and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford University Press. 2011), 503f.

⁴ Marcus Borg, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary* (HarperSanFrancisco. 2006), 231.

We have heard of “guilt by association.” Here, we have “shame by association.” How did the last part of verse 9 end? (“The insults of those who insult you fall on me.” NIV) How was God being shamed or insulted by the presence of the animals and the money changers in the temple courtyard?

How was Jesus identifying himself with God in his behavior? (“my Father’s house”; he wanted to restore his Father’s honor; he wanted distractions from worship removed, etc.)

- Have a class member read John 2:18-22.

“This was a transformation in the meaning of temple and holy space. In the ancient world, temples were primarily homes for the gods, usually served by priestly servants, but not places where the people as a whole gathered. This is also seen in the holy of holies of the Jerusalem temple being a place of the presence of God, entered only by the high priest once a year. Now that sanctuary is being identified with the body of Jesus as a dwelling place, a home, and the rest of the Gospel is an invitation to all who follow him to enter it and base their lives there.”⁵

The Jewish leaders were obviously confused by Jesus’ statement. Only later did Jesus’ disciples understand what he meant. Later, this image of the body being the temple of God stayed with the Church as it grew and continued to understand how to be a follower of Jesus. For example, Paul uses this image in letters he wrote to the Corinthians in approximately 53-55 AD.

- Have class members read 1 Corinthians 3:16-17 and 2 Corinthians 6:16-7:1.

Transformational Exercise

[Distribute the handout.]

[Read the paragraph on the handout.]

In the next few minutes of silence, I invite us to see our “temple” as a visiting Jesus Christ would see it. I will read the paragraph on the handout, then we will have some time for reflection. You may want to jot down some thoughts or a prayer. Then, I will close us in prayer.

[The handout has this paragraph:] Is a clean sweep of our “temple” needed? If Jesus were to enter our “temple” – our bodies and our life through our bodies, would he be disturbed by improper behavior? Would he see a misuse of the temple in our language or our attitudes? What would be on the tables that he would overturn? What beasts would he chase from our souls? Do we need to repent - to ask Christ to cleanse our “temple” and to accept our crucifixion so we may become more like Jesus? [Space] “I have been crucified with Christ and it is no longer I who live but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Galatians 2:19b-20)

⁵ David F. Ford, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 72.

Before I lead us in prayer, let's read together the verse at the bottom of your handout.

[After the reading, close in a prayer something like this: *Holy Lord, we ask you to cleanse us of anything that is impure or unholy – anything that keeps us from being what you designed us to be, temples of the Lord. Amen.*]

Is a clean sweep of our “temple” needed?

If Jesus were to enter our “temple” – our bodies and our life through our bodies, would he be disturbed by improper behavior?

Would he see a misuse of the temple in our language or our attitudes?

What would be on the tables that he would overturn?

What beasts would he chase from our souls?

Do we need to repent - to ask Christ to cleanse our “temple” and to accept our crucifixion so we may become more like Jesus?

“I have been crucified with Christ and it is no longer I who live but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Galatians 2:19b-20)