

The Gospel of John
Lesson 5 – John 2:13-25
Seeing the Signs

We now come to the second sign. This sign will concern the Temple. Again, before we jump into the story a bit of background about the Temple. This was the second Temple. The first Temple had been built by Solomon and destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. The second Temple had been under construction since the Jewish leadership had returned from exile in Babylon around 516 BCE. Herod the Great (72 BCE – 1 BCE) completely refurbished and expanded the Temple. It was one of the largest and most beautiful buildings in the Roman Empire. It consisted of an outer court (with stalls where Gentiles could enter), the Inner Courts (where only Jews could go consisting of the Court of the Women, the Court of the Israelites for men only, and the Court of the Priests for Priests and Levites only), the Sanctuary (containing various religious items), and the Holy of Holies (which was accessible only once a year by the high priest). The Temple was the center of religious life for Jews, though most Jews were fortunate if they could visit it once in their lifetimes. It was only after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70CE that the synagogue became the center of Jewish religious observances.

The Passover of the Jews: This is the first of three Passovers that Jesus celebrates in Jerusalem, only the last of which is mentioned in the other three Gospels. The mention of the Jews here is used as an explanation to Gentile audiences that Passover is a Jewish holiday. There is no pejorative intended because Jesus is in town to celebrate it. Passover was also the highest of the high holy days and so the Temple complex would be filled to overflowing with both Jews and Gentiles. This means that in the court of the Gentiles, the stalls would be filled with vendors selling animals for sacrifice and exchanging foreign coinage for the “Tyrian” coinage, which was the only acceptable coinage for paying the Temple tax.

Cleansing the Temple: It is hard to imagine that Jesus drove “all of them”, meaning animals, vendors, and visitors out of the Temple. Such an act would have brought about a response from the Roman garrison that kept watch from the Antonian Fortress. I would argue instead that Jesus drove out enough to make his point, which was that people had forgotten the true nature of sacrifice. That true sacrifice was not an exchange with God, but was showing mercy, humility, and justice (Micah 6:8). Thus, Jesus’ comments about a marketplace are more about the transaction between people and God, than between people and people. In other words, this was a prophetic act more than a permanent closing of the Temple system.

Show us a sign: The Jews here are the Jewish Temple leaders, who ask for a sign to prove he is a prophet who can cleanse the Temple. His answer, on its face, seems absurd; tear down the Temple and Jesus will rebuild it after three days. As John explains however, the “sign” Jesus offers them is that he will replace the Temple as the center of worship. No one, including the disciples, understood this.

Many believed: This closing section seems confusing but in Johannine terms it makes sense. Believing in Jesus because of seeing signs is not the same thing as believing in Jesus because the Spirit moves one to believe. We will learn more about this in the next chapter.

Questions:

1. What had been your impression of Jesus cleansing the Temple before reading this summary?
2. Why do you think that Jesus, in John’s Gospel, speaks in such cryptic terms?
3. How did you come to believe in Jesus?