

John 2:13–22

Introduction

The village of Cana, where Jesus changed the water into wine, was in central Galilee, about halfway between the Mediterranean Sea and the Sea of Galilee (see map on p. 7). In verse 12 of chapter two, John tells us that Jesus “went down to Capernaum, with His mother and His brothers and His disciples, and they stayed there for a few days.” Capernaum was sixteen miles west and just a little north of Cana on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Then, in verse thirteen, John tells us:

I. John 2:13 — The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

Jerusalem was about eighty miles south of Capernaum in Judea (travelling in a straight line). Notice that even though one travels north to Capernaum from Cana, one is said to go “down” to Capernaum because of its relative elevation (330 feet above sea level to 682 feet below sea level; a difference of over 1,000 feet). In a similar way, even though Jerusalem is 80 miles south of Capernaum, one is said to travel up to Jerusalem not only because of its elevation (2,575 feet above sea level; a difference of over 3,200 feet from Capernaum), but also because it was the historic capital city of Israel and the place where the temple still stood. So, after the “few days” spent in Capernaum, Jesus went up to Jerusalem because the Passover of the Jews was at hand.

The Passover festival was one of the largest festivals on Israel’s religious calendar. Jews from all over Palestine and even from more distant provinces of the Roman Empire would also be making the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. In more ways than one, Jerusalem was a long, long way from Cana in Galilee. This would be both the perfect place and the perfect time for Jesus to work a miracle or perform a sign, wouldn’t it? Only, when Jesus does arrive in Jerusalem at the temple, the way John describes the scene has a certain sense of foreboding. There aren’t any awestruck comments about the temple such as “What wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!” (cf. Mk. 13:1). There’s no mention of the festive atmosphere of the crowds. We’re told, instead, in verse fourteen:

II. John 2:14 — He found in the temple [Greek word order] those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there.

The buying and the selling and the trading going on were not, in themselves, wrong. Especially for those whose homes were further away from Jerusalem it would have been difficult if not impossible to bring their own animals for sacrifice. The money-changers were also needed for converting the various currencies from around the Roman Empire to the approved currency for the temple tax required in the law (cf. Exod. 38:11-16). It wasn’t wrong for the merchants and traders to be making a profit. If they were cheating the people (as it seems they probably were at a later time; cf. Mat. 21:13), that’s never mentioned here. The fact that they might have been showing contempt for the Gentiles by conducting this business in the outer temple court of the Gentiles is also never mentioned (cf. Mk. 11:17). John makes just one, simple observation: “He found *in the temple* those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there.”

Apparently, this was just “business as usual” in Jerusalem at a time of festival. The majority of the Jewish people must have accepted this reality without any significant protest or there’s no way it could have continued. After all, the buying and selling and trading was all necessary for the observance of Passover and the payment of the temple tax. The outer court of Herod’s temple was massive, and could easily accommodate the animals and the sellers and the money changers with plenty of room left over (see graphic on page 8). It was even divided into two parts, so maybe it was only one part where these merchants were set up. Even many of the believing and faithful Jews might have come to put up with this state of affairs—and maybe even overlook it—as just the way things were.

But now John is inviting us to see things from a wholly different vantage point: through the eyes of the Messiah Himself—the Word become flesh who was with God and who was God—who has arrived, now, at the temple. And when we view the scene through His eyes, what will we see? John says that Jesus “*found in the temple those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there.*” And suddenly, we become “uncomfortable.” Suddenly, what might have previously been “put up with” or even “accepted” now begins to appear in the very worst possible light. So we read in verses 15-16:

III. John 2:15–16 — 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.”

Jesus’ whole life as the Word made flesh was revelation; His very existence was one continuous “act” of revelation. But we can also say that uniquely in the days of His public ministry in Israel, His life consisted of a whole series of “acts” of revelation. This act in and of itself is, therefore, revelation. It reveals to us first of all the worship that God requires.

One commentator writes: “Instead of solemn dignity and the murmur of prayer, there is the bellowing of cattle and the bleating of sheep. Instead of brokenness and contrition, holy adoration and prolonged petition, there is noisy commerce” (Carson). On the one hand, I really appreciate the point this commentator is making. On the other hand, the point here in John is not the chaotic “noise,” but rather the very nature of the activity itself. We don’t need to imagine “bellowing” and “bleating.” We don’t need to imagine loud bartering over the sale of animals. Why can’t we assume that everything was done as “tastefully” and “respectfully” as possible? The problem here is not the noise or the chaos, but the simple fact of trade happening in God’s house. There was a place for the selling of cattle and sheep.” Cattle and sheep were needed for the temple sacrifices. There was a place for “commerce.” Commerce was needed for the temple tax prescribed in the law of Moses. But the place for these very “good” and “legitimate” things was not in the temple where a penitent and redeemed people came to worship and commune with their holy and merciful and gracious God.

In the first place, God has the sovereign right to say what is allowed and what is not allowed in connection with His house and His worship. What could be more self-evident than this? Our “sincerity” in worship can never justify, therefore, the violation of what God has prescribed for His worship. How were people to know that they shouldn’t engage even in good and God-

glorifying trade (no matter how “tastefully” or “respectfully” conducted) in any part of the temple courts? The most basic and obvious answer to this question is that the only things that should be happening in *God’s house* are the things that God has positively commanded. God had commanded that His house should be a house of prayer (a specific term, here, for the nature of true temple worship; cf. Isa. 56:7; Mat. 21:13). He had never commanded that it should be a house of trade (even trade exclusively for the sake of temple worship). What right do we have to introduce into the worship at God’s “house” anything that God Himself has not positively ordained (even things that might otherwise be good and truly glorifying to Him)?

What are the things that God has ordained for *this* “place” – the gathering of His people *specifically* for the sacred task of “temple” worship? Prayer to Him; the singing of His songs (congregationally; whether in unison or antiphonally?); the reading of the Scriptures, teaching and exhortation from God’s Word; mutual exhortation; the offering of our gifts; and the observance of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. How careful and meticulous should we be in guarding the things that happen in this place because it is *God’s* place and because He alone has the right to prescribe what happens here! Jesus said: “Do not make My Father’s house a house of trade.” I wonder if today, He might also say: “Do not make my Father’s house a house of pageantry (whether of the ‘contemporary’ *or* the ‘traditional’ variety), a house of theater (whether of the ‘contemporary’ *or* ‘traditional’ variety), a house of the “arts” (whether ‘contemporary’ *or* ‘traditional’), a house of entertainment (whether ‘contemporary’ *or* ‘traditional’), a house of “performance” (whether of the ‘contemporary’ *or* the ‘traditional’ variety).” All of these things may be good and glorifying to God in any other place, but not ultimately in this *place* where God’s people have come together specifically to engage in the sacred task of “temple” worship. It’s true that God is present everywhere, but the “temple” is the place of His “special” presence – the special presence of the God who is exalted in holiness, exalted in justice, exalted in mercy, and exalted in goodness and grace. When we see that we are coming into the “*special presence*” of this God who is exalted on His throne, then how can we not immediately agree that only the things that *He* has prescribed for this place can ever be “fitting,” while all that He has not prescribed must be gladly excluded. When we see God exalted in these ways, the result in us when we come into His house will be on the one hand holy reverence and on the other hand holy joy. And this holy reverence and this holy joy will, in turn, exclude all that God Himself has not ordained—and therefore all that is not “fitting”—for His worship in His special presence. What is the attitude and mindset with which we approach this time, here, each and every Sunday morning?

There is one other principle that I think can be rightly drawn from this text. We must always understand that God’s temple is always and only a specific place. Here in John chapter two the problem was not “trade” in itself, but the place where this “trade” was happening. It was the place that mattered. In the Old Testament, this place was a physical building. In the New Testament, among other things, this place is the physical “gathering” of God’s people with the express purpose of engaging together in the sacred worship of God (cf. 1 Cor. 11:17-22; 14:19). What does this mean for today’s “live-streaming”? My point is not that those of you who are watching this “live-stream” ought to be here right now or that those of you who are here who have watched in the past should have been here. Neither is my point that there could never be a time to cancel in-person church services. This is my point. Just as in the Old Testament God would not have permitted the streaming of the temple worship (if streaming had existed) as a

substitute for making the pilgrimage to the place where He had promised His special presence, so today God does not permit the streaming of a church service as any kind of a substitute for being in this place where God has promised to us His special presence (cf. Mat. 18:20). We could think about it like this: The promised presence of God (cf. Mat. 18:20) can never be streamed (I'm not talking about an "atmosphere" or something we "feel," but about something we believe by faith), and so since the promised presence of God can never be streamed, we know that neither can His temple or the worship that's uniquely associated with that temple ever be streamed. That's not to say that it's not a good thing to stream these things at home when for whatever reason we're truly not able to be in God's "place." And that's not to say that through this "streaming" we can't engage at home in true Christian worship that's pleasing to God. Here in John chapter two, it's the place that matters because it's precisely this place where the God who is exalted in holiness, justice, mercy, and grace, meets together with His people. Here in John chapter two, it's the nature of this place that determines what should and what should not be happening *in this place*.

Jesus' cleansing of the temple *is* revelation. It reveals to us, on the one hand, the worship that God requires. Even more fundamentally, it reveals to us *who* Jesus is. Notice how Jesus reveals Himself publicly here in Jerusalem of Judea as opposed to how Jesus has just revealed Himself privately to His disciples in Cana of Galilee. In Cana, Jesus performed the miraculous sign of turning water into wine. Here in Jerusalem, there's no miraculous sign. Not yet. Here in Jerusalem, the focus is not so much "positively" on the new and better things that have come in the Messiah as it is "negatively" on the Messiah's work of judging, and sifting, and winnowing, and cleansing, and purifying God's people.

What right does Jesus have to be doing these things? What right does Jesus have to be overruling the priestly temple authorities who had given these merchants permission to set up their tables and stalls in the outer court? What right does Jesus have to be wielding a whip and driving people out of God's house? Who, alone, could claim the authority to do be doing such things as these? Can you see that this is an act of supreme self-revelation? "Take these things away," Jesus says; "do not make *My Father's house* a house of trade." Who is this in the temple dumping out the coins of the money-changers and overturning their tables? He is the one whose own Father's house this is. That's who He is. Therefore, He is the one who has the right to order all things in this temple according to His own Father's will. That's who He is. And that's who He is even now declaring and revealing Himself to be. So we read in verse seventeen:

IV. John 2:17 — His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me."

Even though their faith was still in its infancy, they did believe that Jesus was the Christ—the Messiah—the King of Israel. And so as they watched Jesus now cleansing the temple, and they tried to make sense of it, they remembered the words of the first Davidic king of Israel (David himself) in Psalm 69: "Zeal for your house will consume me." Those were the words of David, to whom God gave the plans for the building of the first temple in Jerusalem (cf. 1 Chron. 28:11-19), who stored up the materials for the building (cf. 1 Chron. 22:2-5; 29:1-9), who organized the priests and Levites into their divisions for the temple service (1 Chron. 23-26), and whose own royal son then built the temple according to the plan (2 Chron. 2-7). After Solomon, in the Old Testament, there were several examples of Davidic kings who showed great zeal in cleansing

God's temple after it had been defiled by previous kings (Joash [2 Chron. 24:1-14]; Hezekiah [2 Chron. 29]; Josiah [2 Chron. 34-35]). So as the disciples see this zeal that Jesus has for the temple, they're reminded of the zeal of these previous Davidic kings in Israel. But do they also feel a tension here? How can Jesus be doing these things even before He's been invested with any royal authority?—Before He's been enthroned? We know the answer to this question is that Jesus messianic sonship, which is fully revealed only in His resurrection and ascension and enthronement to the right hand of God is wholly rooted in His "prior," eternal Sonship. We can see—as the disciples still cannot—that when Jesus cleanses the temple while saying, "do not make My Father's house a house of trade," He's acting and speaking as only the messianic *and* the eternal Son of God could have the authority to act or speak. And so it's in light of this that we can see how Jesus is the one in whom Malachi's prophecy is fulfilled.

- Malachi 3:1–5 (cf. Ezek. 44:6-9; Zech. 14:20-21) — **The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple**; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years. "Then I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts.

It's "*the Lord*" Himself who has come to "His temple" in John chapter two. Only, we know that after this cleansing of the temple it was likely not too long before the money-changers and those selling the animals were back – and business went on again as normal. On the one hand, then, this is an act of self-revelation; on the other hand, this is still "only" a sign and a warning of the refining and purifying judgment that Jesus has come to accomplish. The question, then, that we should all be asking is this: "Who can endure the day of His coming, and who can stand when He appears?"—When He comes to purify His Father's house?

When the disciples remembered what was written in Psalm 69, "zeal for Your house" was the part of the quote they could make sense of in the light of what they were seeing. But what about being "consumed"? We might talk in a positive way about being consumed with zeal, but what David says here is that he has been consumed *by* his zeal. He means that it's precisely his zeal for the temple that has resulted in his being consumed, devoured, and eaten up by those who are his enemies and who hate him without cause (Ps. 69:4). He says:

- Psalm 69:7–9 — It is for your sake that I have borne reproach, that dishonor has covered my face. I have become a stranger to my brothers, an alien to my mother's sons. For zeal for your house has **consumed me** [this is not, for the psalmist, a good thing], and the reproaches of those who reproach you have **fallen on me**.

In Malachi's prophecy, the Lord who comes to His temple is only "*consuming*." But if we're to see also in John chapter two a fulfillment of Psalm 69, then this same consuming Lord who

comes to His temple will also—Himself—*be* “consumed.” Jesus quotes from *this same Psalm* in John chapter fifteen:

- John 15:25 (Ps. 69:4) — The word that is written in their Law must be fulfilled: “They hated me without a cause.”

The Apostle Paul also quotes from *this Psalm* and sees it fulfilled in the sufferings of Jesus:

- Romans 15:3 (Ps. 69:9) — For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, “The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.”

In verse 21 of this Psalm David says, “For my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink,” reminding us now of Jesus’ own crucifixion:

- John 19:29 — A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth.

The same one whose judgments are all consuming will Himself be consumed – not ultimately by His enemies, but by the righteous judgments of God. It’s in the light of all these things that we can go on now to read in verses 18-19:

V. John 2:18-19 — So the Jews said to him, “What sign do you show us for doing these things?” Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”

Notice that the Jews don’t argue for the legitimacy of money-changers in the temple. In the face of the moral authority of this righteous zeal, they know there’s no argument to make on that ground. But rather than acknowledge the “moral” authority of Jesus’ words and actions, all they will do is ask for “proof” of His “official” authority to be doing these things. “What sign do you show us...?” Can you already see that in the face of this kind of unbelief, there’s no sign that could ever convince them? So instead of performing a sign right then and there at the demand of “unbelief” Jesus answers: “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”

Was Jesus telling the Jews that *they* should destroy the temple? Or if He wasn’t saying they *should*, was He saying they *would*? The sign that Jesus promises is that *He* will rebuild the temple *after* it has been destroyed, and He will accomplish this great work miraculously in only three days. Who is it that has the power and the authority to build a temple? A king. Who is it that has the authority to build Yahweh’s temple? Only the true heir to David’s throne – the Messianic “Son of God.” But then *who* is it that can build Yahweh’s temple in only three days?

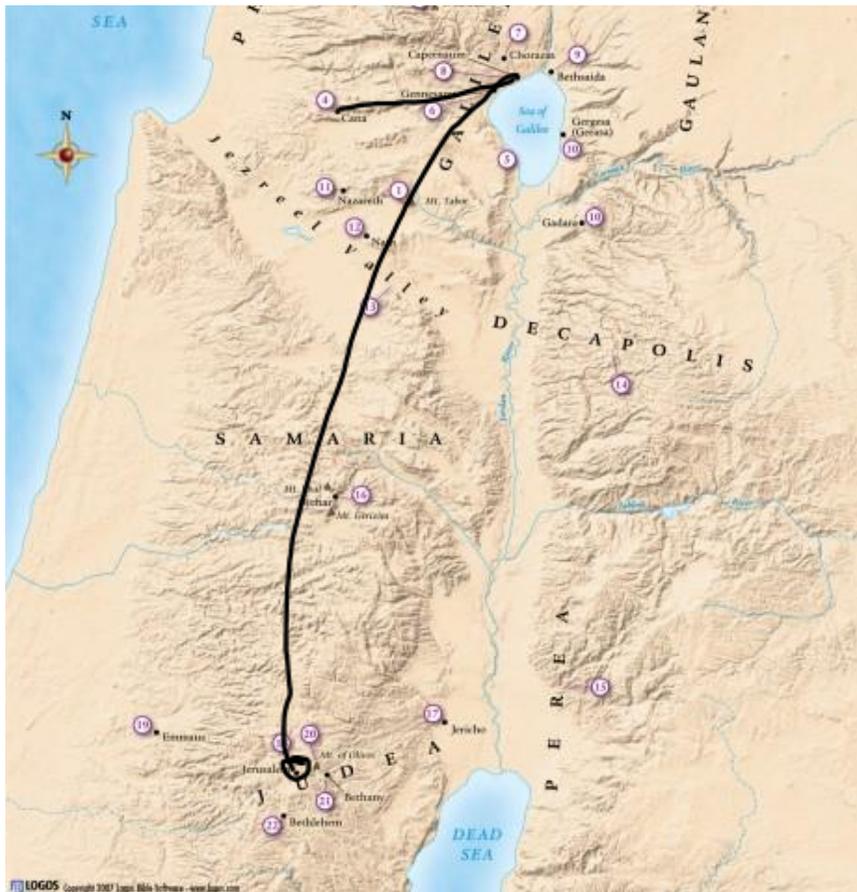
VI. John 2:20–22 — The Jews then said, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?” But he was speaking about the temple of his body. When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

Who is it that has the power and the authority to raise up Yahweh’s temple in only three days? Only that one who is *Himself* the true temple of God – the one who fulfills and replaces the old.

Only that one, as Paul says, in whom all the fullness of deity dwells bodily (Col. 2:9; cf. Col. 1:19).

“Destroy this temple,” Jesus says, “and in three days I will raise it up.” And it’s here in these words—even more than in His driving out of the temple the money-changers and those selling animals—that we see Jesus’ true zeal for the purity and the holiness of God’s house. He Himself, the Son of God from all eternity, came to be that house (cf. 1:14), so that being “consumed” and “destroyed” according to the will of His Father, He might Himself be raised up again as the place where God’s true people can forevermore bring offerings in righteousness to the Lord. Behold! The zeal of our Lord for God’s house!—For the true holiness and sanctity and glory of God’s dwelling place among men.

Who, then, can endure this all-consuming zeal? “Who can stand when He appears?” Only those who take refuge in the one who was consumed and “destroyed” in their place. Only those who see in Jesus—crucified, buried, and raised up from the dead—the true temple of God among men. These are the ones who will be—and who are, even now—granted entrance into God’s house to bring offerings forevermore in righteousness to the Lord. Have you taken refuge in Him? Have you come to share in His zeal for His house (holy reverence and holy joy)?



- 1. Holy Place
- 2. Altar
- 3. Priest's Courtyard
- 4. Israelites' Courtyard

- 5. Chamber of Lepers
- 6. Chamber of Oils
- 7. Gate of Nicanor
- 8. Chamber of Nazarites

- 9. Women's Courtyard
- 10. Chamber of Wood
- 11. The Gate Beautiful

