

The Righteous Anger of Jesus

Scripture: John 2

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After this He went down to Capernaum, He and His mother and His brothers and His disciples; and they stayed there a few days. The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. And He found in the temple those who were selling oxen and sheep and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. And He made a scourge of cords, and drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen; and He poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables; and to those who were selling the doves He said, "Take these things away; stop making My Father's house a place of business." His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for Your house will consume me." (2:12–17)

The Feast of **Passover** commemorated Israel's deliverance from bondage in Egypt—when the Lord killed, by His death angel, the firstborn of the Egyptians but passed over the houses of the Israelites (Ex. 12:23–27). It was celebrated annually on the fourteenth day of Nisan (March/April). On that day, between 3:00 and 6:00 p.m., lambs were slaughtered and the Passover meal eaten. In obedience to Exodus 23:14–17, **Jesus went up to Jerusalem** to observe both the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread which immediately followed (cf. Ezek. 45:21; Luke 22:1; Acts 12:3–4). This is the first of three Passovers mentioned in John's gospel (cf. 6:4; 11:55).

Upon His arrival, Jesus would have found Jerusalem teeming with Jewish pilgrims from all around the Roman world, there to celebrate this foremost of Jewish feasts. Because of the multitudes who came, Passover meant big business for Jerusalem-based merchants. **In the temple** complex, where they had set up shop (probably in the court of the Gentiles), vendors were **selling oxen and sheep and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables**. Since it was impractical for those traveling from distant lands to bring their own animals, the merchants sold them the animals required for the sacrifices—at greatly inflated prices. The **money changers** also provided a necessary service. Every Jewish male twenty years of age or older had to pay the annual temple tax (Ex. 30:13–14; Matt. 17:24–27). But it could be paid only using Jewish or Tyrian coins (because of the purity of their silver content), so foreigners had to exchange their money for acceptable coinage. Because they had a monopoly on the market, the **money changers** charged an exorbitant fee for their services (as high as 12.5 percent [F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 74]).

What had begun as a service to the worshipers had, under the corrupt rule of the chief priests, degenerated into exploitation and usury. Religion had become external, crass, and materialistic; the temple of God had become a “robbers’ den” (Matt. 21:13).

As He surveyed the sacred temple grounds now turned into a bazaar, Jesus was appalled and outraged. The worshipful atmosphere that befitted the temple, as the symbol of God’s presence, was completely absent. What should have been a place of sacred reverence and adoration had become a place of abusive commerce and excessive overpricing. The sound of heartfelt praise and fervent prayers had been drowned out by the bawling of oxen, the bleating of sheep, the cooing of doves, and the loud haggling of vendors and their customers.

Realizing that the purity of temple worship was a matter of honor to God, Jesus took swift and decisive action. Making a **scourge of cords** (probably from those used to tie the animals), He **drove all** the merchants **out of the temple**, along **with** their **sheep and oxen**. In addition, **He poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables**, an amazing feat for one man in the light of the resistance that must have come.

Jesus’ display of force would have immediately created pandemonium in the temple court: the animal sellers frantically chasing their beasts, which were running aimlessly in all directions; the startled moneychangers (and, no doubt, some of the bystanders) scrambling desperately on the ground to pick up their coins; **those who were selling the doves** hastily removing their crates as Jesus had commanded them; the temple authorities rushing to see what all the commotion was about. Yet Jesus was neither cruel to the animals (those who object to His mild use of force on them have never herded animals), nor overly harsh with the men. Apparently the uproar He created was contained enough not to alert the Roman garrison stationed in Fort Antonia, which overlooked the temple grounds. Watching Romans may have found some satisfaction in this assault on the temple system and its leaders, who gave them so much grief.

At the same time, the intensity of His righteous indignation was unmistakable. Christ would not tolerate any mockery of the spirit of true worship. His indignant words **to those who were selling the doves**, “**Take these things away; stop making My Father’s house a place of business,**” applied to all who were polluting the temple and corrupting its intended purpose. Jesus’ reference to God as His Father was a reminder both of His deity and His messiahship; He was the loyal Son purging His **Father’s** house of its impure worship (an action that prefigures what He will again do at His second coming [Mal. 3:1–3; cf. Zech. 14:20–21]).

Several years later, at the end of His ministry, Christ would again cleanse the temple (Matt. 21:12–16; Mark 11:15–18; Luke 19:45–46). Some commentators assert that John is actually referring here to that later cleansing, having moved the account out of chronological sequence. Instead of correctly putting this story at the end of Jesus’ ministry, they argue, John put it here—thus, Jesus cleansed the temple only once, not twice. But their explanations for why John would have misplaced such a significant event are ultimately unconvincing. The cleansing recorded in the Synoptic Gospels took place during Passion Week; the one recorded by John came at the outset of Jesus’ public ministry (cf. John 2:11–13).

The details of the two accounts also differ significantly. In the Synoptics, Jesus quotes the Old Testament as His authority (Matt. 21:13; Mark 11:17; Luke 19:46); in John He uses His own words (2:16). Moreover, John does not mention Jesus’ prohibition against using the temple as a shortcut (Mark 11:16) nor Jesus’ significant judicial statement: “Behold, your house is being left to you desolate!” (Matt. 23:38). And the Synoptics do not mention Jesus’ remarkable challenge, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (John 2:19)—although they do refer to it in the accounts of His trial before the Sanhedrin (Matt. 26:61; Mark 14:58; cf. Matt. 27:39–40; Mark 15:29–30). In light of these differences, it is difficult to see how both the Synoptic writers and John could be referring to the same event. (For a further discussion of Jesus’ second temple cleansing, see my comments on Matthew 27:39–40 in *Matthew 24–28*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary Series [Chicago: Moody, 1989], 258–60).

Watching in amazement as their Master dispersed the temple merchants, **His disciples remembered that it was written** in Psalm 69:9, **“Zeal for Your house will consume me.”** Jesus’ resolute passion and unwavering fervor was clear to all who saw Him. His righteous indignation, stemming from an absolute commitment to God’s holiness, revealed His true nature as the Judge of all the earth (cf. Gen. 18:25; Heb. 9:27). R. C. H. Lenski notes,

The stern and holy Christ, the indignant, mighty Messiah, the Messenger of the Covenant of whom it is written: “He shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the Lord an offering of righteousness,” is not agreeable to those who want only a soft and sweet Christ. But John’s record here ... portray[s] the fiery zeal of Jesus which came with such sudden and tremendous effectiveness that before this unknown man, who had no further authority than his own person and word, this crowd of traders and changers, who thought they were fully within their rights when conducting their business in the Temple court, fled pell-mell like a lot of naughty boys. (*The Interpretation of St. John’s Gospel* [Reprint; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1998], 207)

Like David, who penned the messianic Psalm 69, Jesus' zeal for pure worship found expression in His concern for God's house. And also like David, Jesus suffered as a result, personally feeling the pain when His Father was dishonored. The second half of Psalm 69:9 reads, "The reproaches of those who reproach You have fallen on me." The Jewish leaders never forgot Jesus' assault on the heart of their religious enterprise and on the very seat of their power. In fact, Christ's two physical cleansings of the temple, along with His constant verbal assaults on their hypocrisy, were more than enough motivation to cause them to pursue His crucifixion so vehemently. Not surprisingly, His followers were also later accused of threatening the temple (Acts 6:13–14; 21:28; 24:6).

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