

Bible Study Guide: Week of 3-1-2021

1. Read through the passage below
2. Read my notes and commentary
3. Read the questions at the end and ponder or discuss with others

Pastor Andrew

John 2:13-22

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables. ¹⁵Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶He told those who were selling the doves, ‘Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a market-place!’ ¹⁷His disciples remembered that it was written, ‘Zeal for your house will consume me.’ ¹⁸The Jews then said to him, ‘What sign can you show us for doing this?’ ¹⁹Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’ ²⁰The Jews then said, ‘This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?’ ²¹But he was speaking of the temple of his body. ²²After 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.

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

The Gospel of John tells about three Passover festivals during Jesus’ ministry. The first one takes place here at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry just after his first sign of changing water into wine at the wedding at Cana. The second comes in Chapter 6 just before Jesus feeds 5,000 people with 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish. The final Passover festival comes in chapters 11 and following and coincides with the events of Jesus’ passion, death, and resurrection. It is primarily because of these yearly chronological markers that we speak of Jesus’ three-year-long ministry. John’s account often differs from the synoptic gospels in important ways. In John’s chronology, for instance, Jesus is crucified not after the Passover meal as the synoptic gospels state, but rather on the day of preparation for Passover at the very hour the Passover lambs were slaughtered. In the synoptic gospels, Jesus’ spectacle at the temple is the proximate cause of his arrest and crucifixion—the proverbial straw that broke the camel’s back. Here, the clearing of the temple is one of Jesus’ first public acts. As we will see in coming verses, John’s account of the clearing of the temple differs not only in terms of context, but also in terms of content.

¹⁴In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables.

John alone mentions the presence of the sheep and cattle in the temple. The sale of sacrificial animals would have been a necessary part of the temple sacrifice system given the realities of the Jewish diaspora during the time of Jesus. Jews traveling from Alexandria, Syria, Asia Minor, or elsewhere to Jerusalem could not have easily transported sacrificial animals with them, so they would buy them once they arrived. Further, the temple tax (customarily a half-shekel per year) could not be paid in Roman currency (the Roman Denarius was the coin of daily commerce) because of the idolatrous inscription and image of the emperor on the coin. One half shekel was worth about 1.5 denarii, or about a day-and-a-half’s wages for a laborer. Money changers were necessary in order to facilitate the temple tax system.

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The word for cords here implies small ropes made of rushes. John alone among all the gospels tells about Jesus using a whip. Verses 14-16 are one long complex sentence in Greek, highlighting the whirlwind nature of Jesus’ actions. Jesus’ actions as described by John are much more overtly forceful than his actions described by Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Likewise, Jesus’ complaint here is different than in the synoptics. Here, he says, literally, “Stop making my Father’s house a trade house!” The Greek word for trade or market here is “*emporion*,” a clear cognate of our English word “emporium.” This may be a reference to Zechariah 14, which prophesied that there will one day be no merchants in the house of the Lord. In the synoptics, however, Jesus quotes Jeremiah 7,

saying “My temple shall be called a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of robbers.” There, it seems the exploitative practices we often assume were happening in the temple were Jesus’ primary concern. Here, however, he seems to be calling into question the whole temple-commerce system that undergirded the worship of the people during that time period.

¹⁷His disciples remembered that it was written, ‘Zeal for your house will consume me.’

Here, another scripture reference, this time to Psalm 69:10, serves to interpret this strange story for us. This is the lens through which John wants us to see Jesus’ harsh actions: he is not disturbed or crazy or violent, but zealous and even consumed by zeal. As they will in v. 22, the disciples come up here only incidentally. John is looking back at past events and noting that after Jesus’ ministry, death, and resurrection, his disciples discerned and interpreted his actions through scriptural study.

¹⁸The Jews then said to him, ‘What sign can you show us for doing this?’

I’ve talked at length before (and will again, no doubt) about John’s use of the term “the Jews” and how it is often appropriated by modern Christians in harmful ways. “The Jews” is a short-hand reference in John for several groups: Judean persons in general, members of the Jewish religious leadership who opposed Jesus, and Jewish hearers of Jesus who did not fully embrace or comprehend his words and actions. Remember that John’s audience was made up of early Jewish believers in Jesus who were likely painfully expelled from their synagogues and communities and families for their belief in Jesus, so the apparent animosity between Jesus and these opponents called “the Jews” reflects in part this tension within John’s own community.

With that public service announcement out of the way, here in v. 18 “the Jews” most likely refers to the religious leaders within the temple or, perhaps, other Jewish folks in the temple who wanted some explanation for Jesus’ behavior. Remember, according to John this event happened at the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry. Nobody among the crowds at the temple even knows of Jesus yet, much less believes in him. Therefore, the request made by some of the Jews here is more than reasonable given the circumstances. They are open to accepting Jesus’ actions—if he can back them up with a sign that confirms his authority.

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As is typical in John’s gospel, Jesus points to the cross when folks ask him about his power or authority. Already in John’s version of things, Jesus is pointing ahead to his death and resurrection. Not even his disciples understand what he is saying until “after he was raised from the dead,” but Jesus boldly insists his authority is not just to overturn the temple system, but to redefine the temple. In a post-70 AD world when the temple lay in ruins, Jesus—the body of Christ—would become for the early church the primary point of worship. Also, as is typical in John’s gospel, Jesus’ opponents completely misunderstand his words. They are thinking in very different terms than Jesus is thinking. He is speaking of his body, they are still (understandably) focused on the literal temple building. Jesus’ disruption of the temple activities, along with John’s chronology of the crucifixion coinciding with the sacrifice of the Passover lambs two years after this Passover story highlights the theological truth early Christians began to realize—Jesus fulfilled and in many ways replaced the temple and sacrifice system. Again, we should be careful we do not allow such ideas to do harm to our Jewish neighbors, yet we should also be aware of how our own worship practices have been shaped by this history.

Discussion/Reflection Questions:

- 1. As you imagine this story, put yourself in the roles of different characters in the story. Who is it easiest for you to relate to? Who is it hardest for you to relate to? Why do you think this is the case?**
- 2. What does it mean to you to make the Father’s house a house of trade?**
- 3. During what is a long and difficult time away from our sanctuary building, what aspects of our congregational life and individual lives might Jesus be working to cleanse and reform?**