

**The Gospel of John (13);
“Jesus Clears the Temple” (2:13-25)**

Introduction:

Last week we began to address the first of seven signs that John the Apostle recorded in His Gospel. Each sign revealed and displayed the glory of the Lord Jesus. But the meaning of these signs was not understood by all who had witnessed them. Only those who were present who were spiritually enabled by God to see and understand their meaning were impacted by the signs, those being His disciples. But additionally, readers of this Gospel, who believe what they read and are instructed by the Holy Spirit as to the meaning and relevance of the signs, are also impacted by what God reveals to them through these signs.

Last week we sought to emphasize that when this Gospel uses the word “sign”, it indicates something more than Jesus performing a miracle which shows forth the divine and human natures of the Lord Jesus, the Son of God. Certainly the sign does that, but the sign points to more than just His *identity*; it also points to His *work*—the sign “signified” what God was doing through Jesus Christ in the context of the history of redemption. We saw that when Jesus turned water into wine at the wedding at Cana, God was revealing that in Jesus Christ the promised messianic age had arrived. Jesus Christ was replacing the old ceremonial and traditional beliefs and practices of Judaism, which foreshadowed God’s promise of His kingdom (the stone waterpots), with the celebration of those things being realized in history through Jesus Christ (the great quantity and quality of wine). As we stressed last Lord’s Day:

In the presence of Jesus, a collection of pure (stone) water jars for the ceremonial washing of many people serves to herald the fulfillment (“to the brim”) of the entire ceremonial purification of Second Temple Judaism. In the person and work of Jesus, the purification jars and their water become useless, only suitable to contain celebratory wine.¹

Today we wish to continue our study by addressing the next episode (pericope), which is contained in **John 2:13-25**. Here is the passage from the New King James Version:

¹³Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴And He found in the temple those who sold oxen and sheep and doves, and the money changers doing business. ¹⁵When He had made a whip of cords, He drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen, and poured out the changers’ money and overturned the tables. ¹⁶And He said to those who sold doves, “Take these things away! Do not make My Father’s house a house of merchandise!” ¹⁷Then His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for Your house has eaten Me up.”

¹⁸So the Jews answered and said to Him, “What sign do You show to us, since You do these things?”

¹⁹Jesus answered and said to them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”

²⁰Then the Jews said, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?”

²¹But He was speaking of the temple of His body. ²²Therefore, when He had risen from the dead, His disciples remembered that He had said this to them; and they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had said.

²³Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name when they saw the signs which He did. ²⁴But Jesus did not commit Himself to them, because He knew all men, ²⁵and had no need that anyone should testify of man, for He knew what was in man.

¹ Klink, p. 166.

Now, although John makes references to people seeing the “signs” which Jesus did (v. 24), actually there is nothing in this episode that Jesus did which was a “sign” to the people, even as Jesus cleared the temple. Later in John 4:54 the Evangelist identified the second sign that Jesus displayed. There we read, “This again is the second sign Jesus did when He had come out of Judea into Galilee.” This is a summary statement appending the pericope in which Jesus healed the son of a nobleman (John 4:46-53).

But in the pericope which we are considering today, the Lord Jesus does *foretell* a future sign that He would give to this generation. In verses 18 and 19 we read,

¹⁸So the Jews answered and said to Him, “What sign do You show to us, since You do these things?”

¹⁹Jesus answered and said to them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”

His future resurrection from the dead would be a sign to the Jews. In fact what the Lord Jesus was doing in this episode was foretelling the seventh and greatest sign of John’s Gospel, even the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

In our consideration of this portion of the Word of God, we will address the details of the account before us. Then secondly we will address the major “problem” respecting the interpretation of this passage. And lastly we will consider the theological meaning and implications that this account presses upon us.

I. The details of the account

Last week we sought to give some principles for interpreting narrative portions of Holy Scripture. Commonly when a single episode (pericope) is identified, certain definitive characteristics may be identified regarding that pericope. In the first of four stages there is an *introduction* or *setting* established for the pericope. Here there is commonly a statement of time and place where the event takes place and an introduction of the main characters involved. The second stage is the generally a description of some form of *conflict* with an accompanying *reaction* or *response* of Jesus, which is the climax of the pericope. Third, there follows a *resolution* which commonly has a response given by Jesus Himself. And fourth and last, the pericope ends with a *conclusion* which is often an *interpretation* of the event for the reader. We saw these four characteristics in the pericope we considered last week. And we may see them in the episode before us today.

1. The *introduction* or *setting* (2:13-17)
2. The *conflict* or *difficulty* is established (2:18-20)
3. The *resolution* of the conflict or difficulty (2:21, 22)
4. The *conclusion/interpretation* of the event (2:23-25)²

As we did last week, using this 4 point structure we may draw out an outline. And so, we will consider this account by first assessing the *introduction* or *setting*, in which...

A. Jesus cleared the temple (2:13-17)

Again let us read these verses, John 2:13-17.

¹³Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴And He found in the temple those who sold oxen and sheep and doves, and the money changers doing business. ¹⁵When He had made a whip of cords, He drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen, and poured out the changers’ money and overturned the tables. ¹⁶And He said to those who sold doves, “Take these things away! Do not make My Father’s house a house of merchandise!” ¹⁷Then His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for Your house has eaten Me up.”

² Edward W. Klink, III, *John*. Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Zondervan, 2016), pp. 159f.

Our Lord and His disciples had only recently arrived in Capernaum, the fishing village on the northeast shore of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus and His disciples, as well as His mother, his brothers, and his sisters had traveled there with Him. The Evangelist would not write again of Mary the mother of Jesus until the end of His Gospel in John 19:25-27.

The mention of his brothers and sisters should be best understood as sons and daughters born to Mary and Joseph after Jesus had been born to Mary when she was a virgin. Roman Catholics assert that these were cousins, not brothers and sisters.³ Others have argued that these must have been sons and daughters of Joseph from a previous marriage and that Joseph was widowed when he wedded Mary. That is quite a creative assertion, but there is no historical, grammatical, or vocabulary evidence that underscores this claim. The simplest way to understand the identity of these brothers and sisters is that they were half brothers and sisters. Mary was their mother and Joseph was their father. Mary was the mother of Jesus, her first born Son.

The Evangelist recorded that “they did not stay there many days” (John 2:12). And then in verse 13 we read, “**now the Passover of the Jews was at hand.**” The Passover celebration was one of three annual feasts in which Jewish males were to travel to Jerusalem to worship at the temple. Actually there was the Feast of Unleavened Bread which would last a week and the Passover was observed at the end of the week. The Passover would have taken place at the full moon toward the end of March or the beginning of April, for the Jews followed a lunar calendar rather than a solar calendar, as we do. The other two feasts included The Feast of Weeks, or sometimes called Harvest or Pentecost, which occurred in May or June, 50 days after the barley harvest, and the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths, which would take place in September or October.

And so, after having been in Galilee a short time, “**Jesus went up to Jerusalem**” for the Passover celebration. Now whereas the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) record only one Passover, the Gospel of John records at least three and possibly a fourth Passover celebration. It is largely from John’s Gospel that the duration of Jesus’ earthly ministry is determined to have lasted 3 or perhaps 3½ years.⁴ But actually this is not an easy matter to determine with certainty. Here is **J. C. Ryle’s** summary of the matter:

The exact number of Passovers which our Lord kept, and consequently the exact length of His ministry from His baptism to His crucifixion, are points on which there is much difference of opinion. For myself I can see no better view than the old one, that our Lord’s ministry lasted three years. It evidently began shortly before a Passover, and ended with a Passover. But whether it included only three Passovers, and in that case lasted between two and three years,—or four Passovers, and in that case lasted between three and four years,—I think that we have no materials for deciding positively. If I must venture on opinion, I think it most likely that our Lord only kept three Passovers.—But it is an open question, and one happily not of deep moment.—Three Passovers are distinctly named by John: viz., the one before us, the one in the sixth chapter (John 6:3), and the one at which our Lord was crucified. If the “feast” mentioned in the fifth chapter (John 5:1) was the Passover, our Lord kept four Passovers. But this last point cannot be settled.⁵

Upon arriving in the temple in Jerusalem, we read in **verse 14**, “**And He found in the temple those who sold oxen and sheep and doves, and the money changers doing business.**”⁶ Moffatt translated this clause, “My Father’s house should not be turned into a shop!”⁷ Within the large area of the temple grounds there were different courts with the temple building itself in the middle. The outer court was the largest, and was the court of the Gentiles. Gentile worshippers were allowed to come this close to the temple, but no farther. That the Jews had transformed this large courtyard into a Jewish business venture would itself have diminished the role and significance as the temple being a place of worship of all nations.

³ Interestingly, this is also the view of J. C. Ryle, which is puzzling.

⁴ See John 2:13-23; 6:4; 11:55, and possibly 19:14.

⁵ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on John*, vol. 1 (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987, orig. 1869), pp. 110.

⁶ Wolfgang Musculus (1497-1563) “remarks on this expression, that if the sale of animals for sacrifices called forth Christ’s displeasure, much more must He be displeased at what goes on continually in Roman Catholic churches. The sale of masses, indulgences, etc., must be far more offensive to Christ than the sale of oxen and sheep.” [Ibid, p. 113.]

⁷ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (William B. Eerdmans, 1971), p. 195.

Most Jewish worshippers who traveled to Jerusalem from any distance did not travel with their sacrificial animals. They would purchase animals for sacrifice in Jerusalem, which had been raised for this purpose. Also, every Jewish male was required to pay a temple tax.

People from all over the Roman Empire gathered to Jerusalem for the high festivals, bringing many different coins with them; but the temple tax, to be paid by every conscientious Jewish male of twenty years of age and over, had to be deposited in Tyrian coinage (because of the high purity of the silver). This annual half-shekel (to use the language of the Old Testament) was equal to half a train stater or tetradrachm, and so two Jews often joined together to pay the tax in one coin.⁸

The moneychangers would charge interest (upwards to 12.5% interest?) for exchanging money in order to pay the temple tax in the one form of currency accepted by the Jewish leadership.

In John's Gospel only, we read that Jesus calmly, methodically, made a whip to drive them all out. **Verse 15** reads, "**When He had made a whip of cords, He drove them all out of the temple.**" Leon Morris wrote, "It is clear that it was not so much the physical force as the moral power He employed that emptied the courts."⁹

Now it is important to note that Jesus did not charge these sellers of sacrificial animals or the moneychangers of gouging their patrons. Yes, in Mark's account of Jesus clearing the temple, the dishonesty of those selling and exchanging money were renounced by the Lord Jesus, but not here in John 2.¹⁰ Here Jesus was objecting to the fact that business itself was taking place within the environs of the temple. Again, we read, "And He found in the temple those who sold oxen and sheep and doves, and the money changers doing business." He declared in **verse 16**, "**Take these things away! Do not make My Father's house a house of merchandise!**" "Jesus' concern is not with trade itself but the location of the trade."¹¹

Notice also the play on words, "My Father's house" and "a house of merchandise." "In contrast to the Synoptics' cleansing, Jesus here is not objecting to their dishonesty, but to their presence."¹²

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. It is in this sense that (Richard) Bauckham is right: what he calls 'Jesus' demonstration in the temple' was an 'attack on the whole of the financial arrangements for the sacrificial system', and thus an enormous threat to the priestly authorities.¹³

Some have viewed this clearing of the temple as a cleansing of the temple by Jesus, in order to reestablish its worship so that God would again receive the worship rendered there. They have argued that this cleansing may be a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. We read in **Malachi 3:1ff** these words,

"Behold, I send My messenger,
And he will prepare the way before Me.
And the Lord, whom you seek,
Will suddenly come to His temple,
Even the Messenger of the covenant,
In whom you delight.
Behold, He is coming," Says the LORD of hosts.

²But who can endure the day of His coming?

And who can stand when He appears?

⁸ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (William B. Eerdmans. 1991), p. 178.

⁹ Ibid, p. 194.

¹⁰ See Mark 11:17, "And he was teaching them and saying to them, 'Is it not written, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations"? But you have made it a den of robbers.'"

¹¹ Klink, *John*. p. 180.

¹² Ibid, p. 181.

¹³ Carson, p. 179.

*For He is like a refiner's fire
 And like launderer's soap.
³He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver;
 He will purify the sons of Levi,
 And purge them as gold and silver,
 That they may offer to the LORD
 An offering in righteousness.
⁴Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem
 Will be pleasant to the LORD,
 As in the days of old,
 As in former years. (Mal. 3:1-4)*

And then Zechariah 14:21 (ESV) is also cited in this matter, which reads, “And there shall no longer be a trader in the house of the LORD of hosts on that day.”

I am somewhat hesitant accept these assertions, however, for it does not seem that in our Gospel account our Lord was restoring legitimate worship, as much as He was declaring that this existing temple was being replaced by Himself, who was the new and true temple of God. However, **F. F. Bruce** made a good point:

What Jesus did is best classified as an act of prophetic symbolism. If he had Zechariah 14:21 in his mind when he protested against his Father's house (cf. Luke 2:49) being turned into a supermarket, we may recall that the preceding verses of Zechariah 14 tell how all nations will go up to Jerusalem to worship. The only place within the temple precincts which was open to people of 'all nations' (apart from the Israelites) was the outer court (sometimes called the 'court of the Gentiles'); if this area were taken up for trading it could not be used for worship. Jesus' action reinforced his spoken protest.¹⁴

We then read of the reaction of His disciples in **verse 17**: “*Then His disciples remembered that it was written, ‘Zeal for Your house has eaten Me up.’*” This is a quotation of **Psalm 69:9**. In that Psalm King David was calling upon God because of the terrible treatment he had received from his enemies. One of the major issues were his enemies' inability to understand or sympathize with David's intense concern and devotion for the Jewish temple. It had been his concern for God's temple that resulted in him being opposed by so many. What is conveyed in John's Gospel is that this was a prophecy of David's greater Son, Jesus Christ, whose great zeal was for the house of God.

“Jesus' cleansing of the temple testifies to his concern for pure worship, a right relationship with God at the place supremely designated to serve as the focal point of the relationship between God and man.”¹⁵

And so, in Psalm 69:7 King David wrote of his personal shame he experienced from so many who were opposed to him. We read, “For it is for your sake that I have borne reproach, that dishonor has covered my face.” And then in verse 8 we read, “I have become a stranger to my brothers, an alien to my mother's sons.” David was writing of his own experience of being shamed and rejected for having defended the Lord's house. It was as though no one was concerned for the glory of the Lord but him. When he had sought to correct this terrible deficiency among the people, they rejected him for his zeal for the Lord.

It is important to note that all, including His disciples, were taken back with our Lord's actions in the temple. The Jewish leaders were outraged and indignant and opposed Him. “Who gave you authority to do this? Show us a sign!” But His disciples, also, must have been mystified as they observed our Lord sitting down and methodically fashioning a whip and then proceeded to clear the courtyard of animals, their handlers, and the moneychangers. Yes, we read, “*then His disciples remembered that it was written, ‘Zeal for Your house has eaten Me up.’*” But two points may be made with respect to this recollection of Scripture. First, it

¹⁴ F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (William B. Eerdmans, 1983), pp. 74.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 180.

does not say when they remembered the Scripture regarding this incident. It may have been much later after the incident. Verse 17 simply declares that they remembered.

It is difficult to know if this statement is suggesting the disciples remembered the Old Testament text at that moment or only later. In light of verse 22 and 12:16, this is almost certainly a later, reflective statement.¹⁶

And so, verse 17 does not state *when* His disciples remembered the Scripture, which would have assured them that Jesus was the promised Son of David cleansing the temple as the promised Messiah. And second, if they did remember this Psalm 69:7 even as Jesus was purging the temple courtyard, it may not have assured them regarding Jesus' action, but it may have unsettled them further. For perhaps they would have then feared that the rejection of David when he became zealous for the Lord, would also fall upon the Lord Jesus. "This could be bad! This may not turn out well for Him!" may have been the disciples' thoughts as they witnessed this aggressive, perhaps even semi-violent action. As one wrote,

The disciples, witnessing this manifestation of zeal of their Lord for the house of His Father, are filled with fear that Jesus may suffer what David had to endure in his day; namely, that this zeal in some way would result in His being consumed.¹⁷

Note again in **verse 17** that the disciples "remembered what was written." Thus the Evangelist puts forward the truth that the Holy Scriptures are the authoritative interpreter of the events of Jesus' life and ministry of the Holy Spirit. "The Scripture, then, becomes the interpretive grid through which the actions of Jesus are to be understood."¹⁸ Everywhere in Scripture, and here in John 2, the Holy Scriptures are set forth as the final authority for understanding the work of God in Jesus Christ" -- *Sola Scriptura* ("Scripture alone"). **Matthew Henry** wrote:

Observe, 1. The disciples came to understand the meaning of what Christ did, by remembering the scriptures: *They remembered now that it was written*. Note, The word of God and the works of God do mutually explain and illustrate each other. Dark scriptures are expounded by their accomplishment in providence, and difficult providences are made easy by comparing them with the scriptures. See of what great use it is to the disciples of Christ to be *ready* and *mighty* in the scriptures, and to have their memories well stored with scripture truths, by which they will be *furnished for every good work*.¹⁹

Next, we see that the *conflict* or *difficulty* is established in 2:18-20²⁰, in which...

B. A challenge of temple authority (2:18-20)

¹⁸So the Jews answered and said to Him, "What sign do You show to us, since You do these things?"

¹⁹Jesus answered and said to them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."

²⁰Then the Jews said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?"

¹⁶ Klink, *John*, p. 180.

¹⁷ William Hendriksen, *John*, New Testament Commentary (Baker Academic, 1953), p. 123.

¹⁸ Klink, p. 181.

¹⁹ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, vol. 5 (Fleming H. Revell Company, n. d., originally 1721), p. 877.

²⁰ It may seem that the hostile action of Jesus of clearing the temple in verses 15-17 should be part of the *conflict* stage of the pericope (episode). But actually it is part of the *setting* which leads up to the *conflict*, which we now read in verses 18-20.

The Apostle Paul had written of the Jews, “For *Jews demand signs* and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles” (1 Cor. 1:22f). And here we read that the Jews demanded a sign from Jesus.

“The Jews” – a term that here as so often in the Fourth Gospel refers to the Jewish authorities in their hostile attitude toward Jesus—react by asking Jesus for a sign of legitimation—a supernatural demonstration of his authority. Such a sign was repeatedly demanded of Jesus (cf. Mat. 12:38, 39; 16:1ff.; Luke 23:8) and was, indeed, characteristic of Jewish thinking (cf. 1 Cor. 1:22; John 4:48; 6:30). But Jesus never met such requests.²¹

And so, the Jewish leaders, which perhaps included not only members of the Sanhedrin, but also the scribes and temple police, demand a sign from Jesus. **Verse 18** reads, “*So the Jews answered and said to Him, ‘What sign do You show to us, since You do these things?’*” It is as though they were saying, “He has taken this action as if he were a great leader and prophetic reformer. He must now prove that he had the right and the authority to do so. He must show us a great sign to prove that God was with him.” But as one wrote of them,

But this request was *stupid*. The temple-cleansing itself was a sign. It was a definite anticipatory fulfillment of Malachi 3:1-3 (“The Lord whom ye seek will suddenly come to his temple...he will purify the sons of Levi”) and also – as was shown under verse 17 – of Psalm 69. The majestic manner in which Jesus performed this task, so that none, seeing him, even dared to resist, was proof sufficient that the Messiah had entered the temple and was purging it, as had been predicted. What additional sign could one ask for?

The request for a sign was not only stupid, however, it was also *wicked*. It was the result of unwillingness to admit guilt. The authorities should have been ashamed of all this graft and greed within the temple-court. Instead of asking Jesus by what right he had cleansed the temple, they should have confessed their sins and thanked him.²²

Now take note of the very specific language that our Lord used in **verse 19**. There we read, “*Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’*” He did not say, “*If you destroy this temple*”, rather, He stated it more directly. He gives them a command. It is as if He said to them, “Go ahead, destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.” Verse 21 tells us that Jesus was referring specifically to His body as the (new) temple of God, but His hearers would have only perceived Him to be speaking of the physical temple that stood before them in Jerusalem. This is important and very precise language. Here is a good setting forth of the matter:

And here in John Jesus does not say “*I will tear down this temple,*” but “*Destroy this temple.*” The imperative (i.e. command) has a much fiercer sound than a conditional—“*If you destroy this temple*”—would have. It has the character of an ironic provocation, as in prophetic utterances like Amos 4:4; Isaiah 8:9f.: “Go ahead, destroy this temple—as you are already doing and apparently love to do—and in three days I will raise it up again.” So tearing down the temple is not the judgment of God or Jesus on the temple (of which the violent cleansing would then be the prelude) but the manner in which the Jews themselves were disturbing God’s dwelling among them. Jesus announces that what they are apparently consciously tearing down he will build up in three days in a way that is not conceivable to them (“in three days”). Viewed in this light the connection with the temple in which they are standing (and with Jesus’ cleansing of it) is maintained—even given the Evangelist’s explanation. There lay the starting point of the

²¹ Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John; A Theological Commentary* (William B. Eerdmans, 1997), p. 117.

²² Hendriksen, p. 124. However, we would perhaps qualify Hendriksen’s comment to the “graft” of these merchant men. Clearly that is what the Synoptic accounts reveal of the second cleansing at the end of our Lord’s earthly ministry. But as we point out, in John’s account of this first cleansing at the beginning of our Lord’s ministry, there is not a word by Jesus that there was a problem of graft. The problem was that they had turned the temple into a business venture.

entire confrontation. “This temple” the Jews, by their unspiritual “management” of the house of God, were in the process of tearing down. And, as it is already clear now, Jesus himself, in his zeal for God’s claims upon the temple, was to fall victim to that attitude. But the sign that they demanded of him and Jesus held out to them would *not* consist, as the Jews thought and later charged, in a new building (“made with hands,” Mark 14:58) at Jerusalem, but—in the miracle of his resurrection, both as the proof of his authority and as the new way in which God would make his dwelling among his people (cf. 4:21ff.). By the way of this new focus, in which the entire dispute with the Jews is laced under the “heading” of *that* future, all the words about the temple in this context gain a new meaning and are placed on a new level, and “this temple” in verse 19 is seen as a transition, the ambiguity of which later emerges.²³

Jesus was speaking of Himself as the true temple of God. There had been two temples in Israel’s history. The Jewish temple that Solomon had originally built and then later the rebuilt temple after the Babylonian exile, were **types** of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ was the New Testament **antitype** to which the Old Testament **types** anticipated. The temple, although a physical building, was not the true temple. It was as a “shadow” of the true temple, which is Jesus Christ Himself, who was promised to come.

Speaking of the Old Testament types as “shadows” of that which was coming, we may illustrate in this way: if you were standing on a sidewalk on a sunny day, and you saw the shadow of a person at your feet, even though you may not have actually seen the person casting the shadow, you knew someone was approaching you. Virtually everything in the Old Testament that was connected with the worship of God in ancient Israel were types or prophetic shadows of the true reality coming one day in history. This is why we advocate very strongly that the biblical method of interpreting the Old Testament is not “literally” as so many wrongly assert and claim for that they do, but “Christologically.” As the Lord Jesus Himself declared to the Pharisees, “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life” (John 5:39f).

Our dispensational friends are at terrible fault here. They argue and give great emphasis to the idea that there will be a future physical Jewish temple in Jerusalem, a temple in which the worship of God will once again be received by God. They say this because they interpret the Old Testament “literally.” This is error. The temple foreshadowed Jesus Christ. And when He was hanging on the cross, when He said, “It is finished”, one of the matters He was addressing was that everything of the Old Testament that was typological and prophetic, had come to completion in Him and His death on the cross. And therefore, the Apostle Paul could write to the Christians in the church of Colossae,

Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. (Col. 2:16f, ESV)

All of those ceremonial laws pointed to and were fulfilled in Christ and therefore they had come to an end of their binding authority over the people of God.

Even when God instructed Moses in the building of the Old Testament tabernacle, God told him that everything he would construct was but a shadow of the reality, and therefore what Moses would construct was temporary in nature. We read in Hebrews 8:5f.

They serve *a copy and shadow of the heavenly things*. For when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, “See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain.” (Heb. 8:5 ESV)

And the writer to the Hebrews later wrote of the temporary nature of these Old Testament ceremonial laws:

²³ Ibid, pp. 118f.

For since the law has but *a shadow of the good things to come* instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. (Heb. 10:1, ESV)

When Jesus said to these Jewish leaders in response to their demand, “Show us a sign”, *‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up’*, He was speaking of His own body as the true temple, to which the physical temple foreshadowed. But they did not see it. They failed to see the spiritual reality of Jesus Christ to which everything they had given themselves had pointed. And in their stupid spiritual blindness, they rejected the promised Messiah of Israel. They did not perceive the “real sign” to which Jesus was directing them. Consider these insightful words:

Interestingly, the real “sign” given to the Jews—and the disciples as well (cf. v. 22)—is here declared: the destruction of “this temple” and its resurrection “in three days,” that is, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the Gospel the death and resurrection of Jesus cannot be separated; they are one unified event – his “glorification” (cf. 1:14; 2:11; 7:39; 12:23). Since six “signs” are explicitly as such, the “sign” about which Jesus explicitly foretells here must be the seventh and final sign by which Jesus “revealed his glory” (2:11). It is the final and conclusive proof of Jesus’ identity and authority. Thus, the death and resurrection of Jesus is the ultimate temple cleansing, and the temple of his body is a full replacement of the temple of the Jews.²⁴

We read of the response to Jesus by these Jewish leaders in **verse 20**: *“Then the Jews said, ‘It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?’”* There are several matters that are suggested to us by this verse. First, we should understand the identification of “this temple.” Prior to the first century, there were two physically constructed temples in Jerusalem. The first temple was built in the days of King Solomon, the son of King David. This was a magnificent structure that endured until the Babylonian invasion of the 6th century B.C. Due to the judgment of God upon Judah and Jerusalem, God defeated the city of Jerusalem and the first temple was completely destroyed and the people were removed from the land into exile among the nations. This occurred in 586 B.C. But God in His mercy and according to His promise allowed a remnant of His people to return to Jerusalem after 70 years of exile. This remnant under the leadership of Ezra rebuilt the temple, a building that was much smaller in scale than Solomon’s temple. The rebuilding of this second temple began in 516 B.C. and it was eventually destroyed completely by the Roman armies in A.D. 70, after a 3½ years siege. The term, Second Temple Judaism, speaks of the religious beliefs and practices through this 586 year history of the second temple.

Now here in John 2:20 the Jewish leaders speak of the temple in which they were standing in the first century as having been under construction for 46 years. This is not a reference to a third temple, but rather to a great renovation of the second temple that was begun by King Herod the Great, who reigned as a Roman-appointed king of Judea from 37 until 3 B.C. The “rebuilding”, or rather renovation and expansion of this temple continued until its completion in A.D. 63/64, which was only about 6 years before its destruction by the Romans. When Jesus cleared the temple on this occasion, the Jewish leaders said that the temple had been under construction for 46 years. This is one of the statements of Scripture which is a key to dating the ministry of Jesus. We know that King Herod began the reconstruction of the temple in 20/19 B.C. If 46 years is projected, then we conclude that this event of Jesus first cleansing the temple occurred in A.D. 26 or 27.

The third stage of this pericope is the *resolution* of the conflict or difficulty, which is in verses 21 and 22.

C. Jesus was speaking of His body, which His disciples would later remember.

²⁴ Klink, *John*, p. 182.

²¹But He was speaking of the temple of His body. ²²Therefore, when He had risen from the dead, His disciples remembered that He had said this to them; and they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had said.

This explanation by the Evangelist (John the Apostle) resolves the “difficulty.” He was speaking of the temple of His body.

Again, everything in the Jewish temple was a type or a shadow of Jesus Christ. The temple and grounds itself represented the person and identity of Jesus Christ as the one man (or “place”) through which the people of God could enjoy fellowship and communication with their covenant God. The entrance into the temple courts signified Jesus Christ as the door of entrance into the presence of God. The brazen altar on which the priests offered their animal sacrifices pointed to the death of Christ on His cross when He made atonement for the sins of His people. The priests that offered these sacrifices portrayed Jesus Christ as our High Priest who offered Himself as the sacrifice for our sins. The sacrificial animals offered on this brazen altar fed the priests and their families, which was an emblem of Christians communing with their Savior Jesus Christ. As the writer to the Hebrews wrote of Jesus, “We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat. (Heb. 13:10).²⁵ The large laver of water at the entrance of the tabernacle proper portrayed the ongoing cleansing of sin that the Lord Jesus provides for His people so that they can come into the daily presence of their God to commune and worship Him. Inside the first division of the temple building itself, the holy place, there was set forth what Jesus Christ provides for His people. On the left was the candelabra that was trimmed every morning and evening to provide light. This portrayed Jesus as the Light of the world, the One through whom the knowledge of God is communicated to His people. On the right side of the holy place was the table of showbread on which loaves of bread were placed daily. This portrayed Jesus as the life-giver of His people, the true bread that God sent from heaven to give life to His people. The altar of incense just before the veil that was the entrance into the Holiest of Holies was representative of Jesus Christ as the Mediator of Christians’ prayers offered to God the Father. The veil itself was a shadow of the body of Jesus Christ that was “torn” on His cross, whereby true and full entrance into the very presence of God the Father was secured for His people. And then in the Holy of Holies was the ark of the covenant, which was the earthly representation of the throne of God, but it is a throne of mercy, for the very mercy seat, or cover on this ark was no one other than Jesus Christ Himself. It speaks peace to us even in the very presence of our thrice holy God.

There is a place where Jesus sheds
The oil of gladness on our heads;
A place than all besides more sweet;
It is the blood bought mercy seat.²⁶

Here in verse 23, as we saw in verse 17, the Holy Scriptures again come into view.

This pericope emphasizes that the disciples made connections between what they were seeing and hearing in Jesus and what had been recorded in the Scriptures (vv. 17, 22). These are not insignificant comments. Verse 22 even suggests that the disciples were putting their faith in the Scriptures; that is, they were beginning to trust the proof that, though attested long ago, was only now being made manifest. The disciples had come to see as authoritative and complementary the word of God and the Word of God. Although God has fully and decisively revealed himself in *the* Word, his Son, he had always revealed himself through his word, the Scriptures. The Scriptures, then, are depicted as revealing in their subject matter the person and work of Jesus Christ.²⁷

²⁵ In other words, the writer was saying that we have Jesus Christ to feed upon that the Jews who worshipped in the Old Testament tabernacle had no privilege or right to feed upon.

²⁶ Trinity Hymnal #631, “From Every Stormy Wind that Blows”

²⁷ Klink, *John*, p. 185.

And lastly, we read of the *conclusion* of the event, in that...

D. Although many “believed” on Him, Jesus was guarded about committing Himself to them (2:23-25)

²³Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name when they saw the signs which He did. ²⁴But Jesus did not commit Himself to them, because He knew all men, ²⁵and had no need that anyone should testify of man, for He knew what was in man.

There were many who “believed” when they saw the miracles that Jesus performed. But it is clear that the Evangelist was saying that their “believing” was not true saving faith. They were influenced by the person and work of Jesus, but they were not transformed by their “faith.” Their “faith” was a kind of “believing”, but it was not saving faith, which always transforms the sinner into a believing, trusting, and entrusting disciple of Jesus Christ.

Here we see that Jesus was reserved with regard to who it was that He revealed Himself. Even His own disciples had only a limited understanding of His person when He was with them through that three year ministry. Apparently, what many thought that they were “seeing”, they were not understanding. They were greatly impressed, but they were not truly transformed. Here we see the darkness that envelops people even when the glory of Christ is before them. People are blind to the true glory (light) of God. May the Lord open our eyes that we might truly see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

II. The main “problem” respecting the interpretation of this pericope.

The primary “problem” that must be addressed is how one regards John’s account of Jesus cleansing the temple at the *beginning* of His earthly ministry with the account of Jesus cleansing the temple at the *end* of His earthly ministry as recorded in the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. There are many liberal commentators who argue that there was just one cleansing of the temple, so either John’s Gospel gets the history right or the Synoptic Gospels have it right. Of these scholars, some argue that it took place at the beginning of our Lord’s ministry, not at the end. Others argue that it took place at the end of His ministry, not at the beginning. They say that either John or the other Gospel writers recast the event into a different time frame in order to emphasize certain theological teachings within their Gospel. But then there are those who argue for two different occasions when Jesus cleared the temple, both at the beginning of His ministry, as recorded in John, and also at the end of His ministry, as recorded in the Synoptics.

If you take the position that there was only one cleansing, then you must conclude that one or more of the Gospels are not true to history, that the writer(s) deliberately misrepresented the facts in order to convey some teaching. This is a slippery slope that undermines the divine inspiration and inerrancy of the Holy Scriptures, a matter that we defend tenaciously.

The correct answer is that there were two different cleansings. If we had the time and you had the patience, we could show significant differences in detail and language that confirm two different events are presented. The objections and arguments for a single event have all been answered quite thoroughly, if there is the desire to research the matter. I appreciated what **Donald Carson** wrote about this. After discrediting the main arguments of those who advocate only one cleansing, he wrote these words:

In short, it is not possible to resolve with certainty whether one cleansing of the temple took place, or two; but the arguments for one are weak and subjective, while the most natural reading of the texts favours two. Meanwhile it is important to note (1) that a detail in *John’s* account of the temple-cleansing provides crucial background to the *Synoptic* record of Jesus’ trial (*cf.* notes on 2:19), and (2) that this *early* temple-cleansing does not issue immediately in a conspiracy by the authorities to have him arrested and killed, for

Jesus has not yet established his reputation, whereas the *later* cleansing reported in the Synoptics is presented more or less as one of the last straws that call down the wrath of the religious establishment.²⁸

III. The theological meaning and implications that this account presses upon us.

1. The willingness of our Savior to suffer in order bring glory to His Father.

Now in order for us to understand better what was taking place through this event, we must understand that in the ancient world among the Jews, the great concern of people was a sense of honor.

“The culture of the first-century world was built on the foundational social values of honour and dishonor” (David deSilva). It is almost certain that during the first century, all people—from the most powerful to the utmost average person—regarded honor and shame (or dishonor) as their primary axis of value. For this reason, honor was a desired and contested form of currency, like financial currency in the modern Western world. Just as money could be gained or lost in the marketplace today, so also could honor be gained or lost. Honor could be won or lost in public confrontations or social contexts, situations familiar to the Gospels... Either by a question or an action, someone was making a claim to have additional honor. Since honor was a limited good, an increase in honor came by being drained, so-to-speak, from another. When a challenge has been posed, the challenge demands some sort of response. The lack of a response was also considered a response. It was up to the bystanders to decide the recipient of honor: the challenger or the person challenged...²⁹

Now this cultural dynamic may be seen in this episode in which the Jewish leaders challenged Jesus for a sign in order of Jesus to legitimize his actions, in other words, to prove that he had sufficient authority, or honor, to do what He did. Here is how it played out:

Jesus claimed honor by his actions in the temple. It was a claim to a very high honor (at least prophetic honor, if not divine honor). The argument is that the “Jews” responded to his challenge by asking for a sign (v. 18). What happens next is significant: Jesus’s statement was deemed unsatisfactory and the challenge by the Jews is assumed to have been victorious. The leaders treated Jesus’ answer with disdain and contempt—they shame him, so much so that the Gospel does not even deem it necessary to echo the sentiment from the perspective of the crowd. Even the comment of the narrator serves as evidence that Jesus’ challenge was deemed a failure in the historic events.³⁰

In other words, our Lord Jesus did not receive honor due to what He did by cleansing the temple. They regarded Him as having no legitimacy for having done so, for He could not produce a “sign” that proved His authority. Even His disciples must have been much disheartened. “Destroy this temple and in three days you will raise it up? That is not even reasonable, let alone possible?” It was not until later, perhaps much later, that the disciples remembered the Scripture of Psalm 69:9, and then it all made sense to them. Just as King David had experienced from others disgrace and their rejection because as he declared, “Zeal for Your house has eaten Me up”, therefore, “Because for Your sake I have borne reproach; shame has covered my face”, so it was the case with David’s greater Son. Jesus Christ was not honored by this event. He was discredited and disregarded by those present who witnessed His action. To them He probably appeared to be a crazy man. To His own disciples, He must have troubled them. But later, they remembered the Scriptures.

²⁸ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (William B. Eerdmans. 1991), p. 178. Edward Klink agreed that there were two cleansings: “The suggestion of this commentary is that the two temple cleansings provide the more comprehensive solution to this long-standing issue.” Klink, *John*, p. 176.

²⁹ Klink, *John*, p. 177.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

This public shame is what the Son of God experienced throughout His earthly ministry. Even His own mother and brethren would come to the place that they thought He was deranged. And His disciples were at least puzzled, if not at times quite discouraged with both His speech and His behavior (Cf. John 6:60, 66). But this was the very nature of His ministry and life. He was the Son of God, who became the Son of Man, who lived a holy life, a life before His Father, even as He walked in an evil and dark world. He suffered reproach and rejection continually, and eventually that was manifest in His rejection which took Him to His cross. But it was through Him bearing our shame, that He redeemed us from our sin. As we read of Him prophetically in Isaiah 53:

³He is despised and rejected by men,
A Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.
And we hid, as it were, *our* faces from Him;
He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.
⁴Surely He has borne our griefs
And carried our sorrows;
Yet we esteemed Him stricken,
Smitten by God, and afflicted. (Isa. 53:3, 4)

And as our text declares, “many believed in His name when they saw the signs which He did. But Jesus did not commit Himself to them, because He knew all men, ²⁵and had no need that anyone should testify of man, for He knew what was in man” (2:24f.).

Here is a good setting forth of this matter, which is in a theological note entitled, “The Celebration of Shame: From Wine to Whip”, written by Edward Klink:

The key to understanding the pericope above is to grasp the honor/shame conflict between the Jews and Jesus. The narrator does not want us to miss that Jesus actually lost the conflict with the Jews. Everyone knew it: the Jews, the crowd, even the disciples. Jesus lost! Such a statement sounds like it is not the story of the Gospel of John was telling until we realize that “Jesus lost” is the story of the gospel—“Jesus lost” is the good news. We can too easily become like the Jews or the Pharisees or the disciples who think Jesus is their king according to their standards (e.g., military leader, financial provider). No—Jesus lost; it could be no other way. Jesus was shamed. In his temple, at his Passover, in his city, by Jewish leaders who should be serving and honoring him—by his own creation, Jesus received shame.

But this is the good news. This is God in the person of Jesus declaring through Psalm 69 that shame covers my face” (v. 7) and that the insults of the people had fallen on him (v. 9b). In Jesus, God entered his corrupt and negligent temple, declared it unclean, and received its shame. This is the very thing he should not have done in the light of his holiness could not have done—but he did! The contrast between the two pericopae in chapter 2 of John is stark: Jesus has gone from the master of the celebratory banquet to the shameful charlatan. The scene has moved from the Lord of the wine to the servant of the whip, and in neither case was he rightfully recognized. This is the gospel: “For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning the shame” (Heb. 12:2). For this reason we, the children of God, exhort one another to “fixing our eyes on Jesus,” the one who authored true fellowship with God and perfected our wandering faith (Heb. 12:2). To live in this gospel is to celebrate shame, holding fast to what he lost, which is our gain. We too now understand that if we are reviled because of the “name of Christ,” we are blessed, for like Jesus in the temple, “the Spirit of glory and of God rests” on us (1 Pet. 4:4).³¹

2. So we, too, should be willing to suffer in order to bring glory to our God. Matthew Henry made this application:

This zeal did even *eat him up*; it made him *humble* himself, and *spend* himself, and *expose* himself. *My zeal has consumed me* (Psa. 119:139). Zeal for the house of God forbids us to consult our own credit,

³¹ Klink, John, pp. 186f.

ease, and safety, when they come in competition with our duty and Christ's service, and sometimes carries on our souls in our duty so far and so fast that our bodies cannot keep pace with them, and makes us as deaf as our Master was to those who suggested, *Spare thyself*.

3. We should take a lesson from the failure of the Jewish leaders to perceive and respond to the Lord Jesus. Here was Jesus at the observance of the Passover in Jerusalem. Jesus Himself was the true Passover, but no one saw Him as such, even while their religious activity continued unabated. Here is a theological note on this passage, which is entitled, *Jesus is the Temple and the Passover*.

The Gospel has not portrayed Jesus as merely analogous (similar to) to the temple but its full replacement. Although the new mode of worship has not yet been depicted (cf. ch. 4), the new place of worship is now fully defined in Jesus. Christ is the temple of God, and only through Christ can a person find God (cf. 14:1-7). The Fourth Gospel anticipates the temple typology found in Paul, who declares that the church is the body of Christ, the realization of God's promise to dwell among his people (Col. 1:18). Also anticipated is Revelation, where the union between Christ and the people of God finally comes to fruition in the new Jerusalem, when God's people are fully with God in the city of God (Rev. 21:3).

The cleansing of the temple is the replacement of a system that was "trading" what it did not have (the true removal of sins) for what it should not want (personal profit). Purification was God's business; there could be no business partners in this deal. Our churches and our lives are no different. Our "religious" activities are nothing if they are not Christ centered, that is, centered upon his cross and resurrection and the significance of his work for our lives. God is not to be found in any religious practice or place; he is found only through Christ. Anything else is trading on grace, an offense that God himself deems worthy to remove.³²

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing,
so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope. (Rom. 15:13)

³² Ibid, p. 185.