

By Jesus' day, the temple in Jerusalem had become the focal point of worship. We might say that all roads led to Jerusalem. It had not always been this way. Israel started with the tabernacle – a mobile structure that could move with them through the wilderness and into the promised land. In Canaan, the tabernacle and the ark of the covenant had been kept at various locations throughout the centuries. Also, there were a number of locations throughout Israel where people worshiped the great I AM and made their sacrifices to him. When King Solomon built the first permanent and magnificent temple in Jerusalem around 1000 BC, worship began to firmly centralize in that location. Other sacred sites were decommissioned and people were forbidden to make their sacrifices at these other holy sites. As you can imagine, when all the priests of Israel took up residency in greater Jerusalem, their power and influence became both centralized and weighty. We read about all the Israelites making their long journeys to the holy city three times a year to celebrate the great festivals of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. One of the accounts we read is when Jesus travelled there with his parents when he was 12 and decided to freak his parents out and stay at the temple for a couple extra days while his folks were already on their way back to Nazareth. At any rate, the temple had become a cash cow. Businesses made money by providing lodging, restaurants, currency exchange, the sale of animals and produce for sacrifices, and a gift shop on every corner. The priests profited from all the sacrifices they made for the people and from a generous cut of the profits from the business community. Any threats to this comfortable system they had built up would be met with the greatest of resistance.

With all this in mind, Jesus now enters the temple again as a grown adult when he was down at Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover festival. This was Jesus' first recorded visit to Jerusalem after he had officially begun his public ministry.

***The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there. 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." John 2:13-16***

Things had gone wrong. They had gotten out of hand. God wanted the temple to be a place of blessing. These men had turned it into a profit center. God reveals what he originally had in mind for his temple. He says,

***“For my house shall be called a house of prayer  
for all peoples.” Isaiah 56:7***

So this is what is in Jesus’ heart when he enters the temple. Obviously, he sees something quite different than what he wants. Jesus throws quite a ruckus when he drove out the animals and dumped out the coins! Well, for Jesus waltzing into the temple and creating such a fuss, there is going to be hell to pay. Jesus is confronted;

***So the Jews said to him, “What sign do you show us for doing these things?” John 2:18***

When John in this gospel uses the term “Jews,” he means those who oppose Jesus. It’s kind of his shorthand to stand for that group. Jesus was ruffling some people’s feathers and making enemies. They were taking names. No matter. Jesus gives them a quick response,

***Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” John 2:19***

Jesus was like, “Put that in your temple pipes and smoke it, fellas.” They challenged Jesus about his authority. With Jesus’ counter challenge, he gives a quick glimpse of things yet to come. The glimpse Jesus gives concerns both the temple standing there in the background and his crucifixion.

As far as the temple is concerned, Jesus speaks plainly to his disciples;

***And as he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!” And Jesus said to him, “Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.” Mark 13:1-2***

Jesus spoke those words the night before he was arrested. The following evening, Jesus is arrested and goes to trial. Some false witnesses gave testimony there against Jesus. This is what they said;

***And some stood up and bore false witness against him, saying, “We heard him say, ‘I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.’” Mark 14:57-58***

It is evident those words Jesus spoke about tearing down and rebuilding the temple had struck a nerve with the Jews. Here, several years after Jesus had spoken them, the false

witnesses are still echoing his prediction. They are not going to let go of those words of Jesus. Nobody puts the Temple at Jerusalem in a corner. Jesus' words follow him all the way to the cross.

***And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." Matt 27:39-40***

As was so often the case, the Jews misunderstood what Jesus really meant when he said that after the temple was destroyed, he would rebuild it in three days. What did Jesus really mean?

***But he was speaking about the temple of his body. John 2:21***

Was Jesus miffed that the temple had been turned into the largest financial sector of Israel's economy? Yes. Was Jesus unhappy that the Lord's house had been turned into much more than a house of prayer? You bet! But the overarching mission Jesus had in mind was not to straighten things out at the worship site in Jerusalem and get things back to the way they should be. The main thing was replacing the man-made stone Jerusalem temple with a new, spiritual temple. As it says, that temple is Jesus body. This was accomplished in Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension to divine power and glory. This is why, when Jesus was crucified, the thick, heavy temple curtain hiding the holy of holies tore in half, exposing the place where the ark of the covenant stood, the mercy seat, the dwelling place of God. The psalmist summarizes Jesus' passion for this new temple;

***For zeal for your house has consumed me,  
and the reproaches of those who reproach you have fallen on me. Psalm 69:9***

When it says the zeal for God's house consumed him, it does not mean that it just became the number one priority in his life. It means it literally consumed him, devoured him, killed him in the death of his cross. Jesus wanted to provide his people with a true dwelling place, and he was willing to die for it. And he did. Now everything has changed.

***For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily. Colossians 2:9***

What is a temple? It is a place where you access your god. In the person of Jesus, we have access to the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In him we have a secure connection to our God. That connection is so secure and complete, we have actually become part of Jesus, God's temple. Paul explains;

***Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple. 1 Corinthians 13:1-2***

What spiritual mysteries the Lord brings us into! Here we are told that we, too, are the temple of God. This is the work of God in his power on our behalf in our baptism and our life of faith. It is there for us to know, celebrate, and own.

This Lent we are called to draw closer to God in repentance and faith. As the zeal for God's house consumed Jesus, it also consumes us. I am speaking in terms of the old selfish self being consumed. In Lent, we seek to have a little more of that old evil nature consumed away and done with. Why? That we can more fully be the dwelling place of God, that we can be filled with the Holy Spirit who leads us forth in peace and joy, that we can know the way of Christ, that we might have true knowledge and understanding, that we can reflect the goodness of God in our lives, and that we can be firmly planted in the way that leads to everlasting life in the blessedness of God.

God bless you as you are being made into the temple of God, the holy place of his dwelling. Amen.

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