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Signs / Johannine Sign; Sign; Temple Cleansing; Temple / John 2:12-22
The second sign in John 2:12-22 teaches us that Jesus is the new temple.

Introduction

One of my responsibilities as a pastor is to visit church members when they are in the hospital. I am grateful for the opportunity to visit members so that I can provide some spiritual counsel and comfort to them.

During one of my first visits to a member in the hospital, I heard an announcement over the intercom, “Code Blue on the 2nd floor! Code Blue on the 2nd floor!”

I soon saw two or three hospital staff race past me, presumably on their way to the 2nd floor.

“What in the world is ‘Code Blue’?” I wondered.

I soon learned that “Code Blue” was a signal for a medical emergency, often a cardiac arrest or respiratory failure, that called for immediate medical attention.

Later, I learned that there were several different color codes in hospitals.

Color codes are standardized to convey specific meanings and instructions quickly in emergencies.

So, for example, “Code Blue” is a signal for a cardiac arrest or respiratory failure, “Code Red” is often used to indicate a fire or the presence of smoke within the hospital, “Code Pink” is used for an infant or child abduction, “Code Yellow” signifies a missing patient or resident, and so on.

One of my hospital identity badges had a list of the most common color codes on the reverse side of the badge to help me figure out what the color code signified.

Sometimes, we need help to know what a sign means.

The Apostle John wrote *The Gospel According to John*. He wrote this book to help people learn about Jesus.

Like a brilliant lawyer, he set down a masterful account of the life of Jesus. Of the thousands of miracles that Jesus did, John carefully selected seven miracles that he called “signs” to show that Jesus was who he claimed to be.

John wrote in [John 20:30](#), “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book.” He selected just seven of Jesus’ signs to incorporate into his Gospel. “But these are written,” said John, “so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” ([John 20:31](#)).

Each of the seven signs points to a different truth about Jesus.

Last week, we looked at Jesus’ first sign, which was turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana ([John 2:1-11](#)). The truth that we learned in that sign is that Jesus is the Christ who initiates the new covenant.

Today, we are going to look at Jesus’ second sign, the cleansing of the temple.

Scripture

Let’s read [John 2:12-22](#):

¹² After this he went down to Capernaum, with his mother and his brothers and his disciples, and they stayed there for a few days.

¹³ The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ And he told those who sold the pigeons, “Take these things away; do not make my Father’s house a house of trade.” ¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.”

¹⁸ So the Jews said to him, “What sign do you show us for doing these things?” ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days

I will raise it up.”²⁰ The Jews then said, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?”²¹ But he was speaking about the temple of his body.²² 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.

Lesson

The second sign in [John 2:12-22](#) teaches us that Jesus is the new temple.

Let’s use the following outline:

1. Jesus Was Devoted to His Father’s Temple (2:12-17)
2. Jesus Was Describing His Own Temple (2:18-22)

I. Jesus Was Devoted to His Father’s Temple (2:12-17)

First, Jesus was devoted to his Father’s temple.

We read in verse 12, **“After this he [that is, Jesus] went down to Capernaum, with his mother and his brothers and his disciples, and they stayed there for a few days.”**

The phrase **“after this”** (or similar words such as “after these things”) is a phrase that connects two narratives. John used it frequently in his Gospel (e.g., 3:22; 5:1, 14; 6:1; 7:1; 11:7, 11; 19:28, 38).

John put it here to transition from the wedding in Cana in Galilee (where he performed his first sign) to Capernaum.

Capernaum was on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee and it was about 16 miles northeast of Cana. It could be easily reached in a day’s walk.

It seems that Jesus had changed his residence from Nazareth to Capernaum for several reasons.

First, Nazareth was in a small side valley, somewhat off the caravan route, and had a small population.

Second, some of Jesus’ disciples lived in or near Capernaum.

Third, Capernaum was a busy fishing community, giving more ministry opportunities.

Fourth, Nazareth rejected Jesus' claim to be the Messiah.

And fifth, because of his rejection, Jesus needed to find a safe place for his mother, brothers, and disciples to live.

It appears that at this point, Jesus' earthly father Joseph was no longer in the picture as he had most likely died, and Jesus was leading the family. According to [Mark 6:3](#), Jesus had four brothers (James and Joses and Judas and Simon) and at least two unnamed sisters.

Then we read in verse 13, **“The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.”**

After resting for a few days in Capernaum, Jesus went to Jerusalem for the annual Jewish Passover.

This is the first of three Passovers that John mentioned (2:13; 6:4; 11:55). There may have been a fourth Passover during Jesus' ministry that John did not mention.

On Nisan 10, which is sometime in March or April, the Jews selected a lamb for the Passover that was to be celebrated on Nisan 14. The lamb was slaughtered between 3:00 and 6:00 p.m. on Nisan 14.

The Passover commemorated the deliverance of God's people from slavery in Egypt when the angel of death “passed over” homes whose doorposts and lintels were sprinkled with the blood of the slaughtered lamb ([Exodus 12:23-27](#)).

Every male Jew over the age of 12 was expected to travel to Jerusalem for the annual Jewish Passover ([Exodus 23:14-17](#)).

Tens of thousands of Jewish visitors crowded into Jerusalem for this annual festival, which was the greatest of the three major Jewish feasts.

The Jews rightly celebrated the Passover. They were delivered from slavery and misery in Egypt.

This foreshadowed the great deliverance that Jesus would bring by the shedding of his blood on the cross. He would deliver his people from slavery to sin and misery.

People in cultures like ours may not be in physical slavery but they certainly are in spiritual slavery. They are enslaved by sin to all kinds of things. They may be enslaved by drugs, alcohol, pornography, anger, and so many other things. Jesus came to deliver people from every kind of slavery imaginable.

When Jesus arrived in Jerusalem, we read in verse 14, **“In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there.”**

The temple had four courts: the Court of the Gentiles, the Court of Women, the Court of Israel (for men), and the Court of the Priests.

It was in the Court of the Gentiles that merchants sold **“oxen and sheep and pigeons.”** In addition, **“money-changers”** were sitting there.

Pilgrims traveling to Jerusalem did not bring their own animals to offer as a sacrifice, as it would have been easier to purchase an animal in Jerusalem.

Worshippers, however, were not permitted to use Roman coins in support of the temple because such coins were considered “unholy.” Therefore, they had to be exchanged for sanctified coins.

The Court of the Gentiles had become a place of commerce rather than a place for non-Jewish, God-fearing Gentiles to worship God.

Was it wrong to exchange money for the traveling pilgrims? No.

Was it wrong to provide animals to purchase for sacrifice? No.

The problem was that commerce was taking place in the wrong venue.

It would have been no problem if the merchants had sold the animals and exchanged the money outside the Court of the Gentiles in the streets of Jerusalem.

But they were doing so within the precinct of the Court of the Gentiles. That was the problem.

The temple was designed so that people from all nations could worship God. The various courts allowed men and women from all nations to worship God.

Commentator D. A. Carson notes,

“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” (D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary [Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991], 179).

We then read what Jesus did in verse 15, **“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.”**

John records Jesus cleansing the temple at the start of his ministry.

However, the Synoptic Gospels record Jesus cleansing the temple at the end of Jesus’ ministry during the final Passover week just before Jesus’ crucifixion (cf. [Matthew 21:12-17](#); [Mark 11:15-18](#); [Luke 19:45-46](#)).

The circumstances between the two are so different that it is likely that Jesus cleansed the temple twice during his short ministry on earth.

Moreover, since the Jewish religious leaders did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah it is likely that they allowed the corrupt practices to continue, which required Jesus to act a second time to cleanse the temple.

By driving “them all out of the temple,” that is, out of the Court of the Gentiles, Jesus was fulfilling the prophecy of [Malachi 3:1-4](#), which states,

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; 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.

Jesus did not want anything to interfere with the worship of God. Commerce must not interfere with worship.

Furthermore, we read what Jesus did next in verse 16, **“And he told those who sold the pigeons, ‘Take these things away; do not make my Father’s house a house of trade.’ ”**

Jesus gave two commands. The first was to **“take these things away.”** That is, they were to take away the animals and the money changers.

And the second was, **“do not make my Father’s house a house of trade.”** Jesus ordered them not to engage in commerce. They were there to worship the Father.

Jesus referred to **“my”** Father rather than “our” Father, indicating his special relationship with God the Father.

No one opposed Jesus when he drove out the merchants from the Court of the Gentiles. The reason no one opposed Jesus is that Jesus was correct. Trade was not to take place within the temple precinct. Jesus was concerned that God’s name not be profaned.

Verse 17 states, **“His disciples remembered that it was written, ‘Zeal for your house will consume me.’ ”**

The disciples remembered [Psalm 69:9](#), which states, “For zeal for your house has consumed me, and the reproaches of those who reproach you have fallen on me.”

King David had written [Psalm 69](#) centuries before Jesus. When David wrote [Psalm 69](#), he was persecuted for his zeal towards God’s house and his defense of God’s honor.

David’s Greater Son Jesus displayed similar zeal for his Father’s house.

II. Jesus Was Describing His Own Temple (2:18-22)

And second, Jesus was describing his own temple.

Next, we read in verse 18, **“So the Jews said to him, ‘What sign do you show us for doing these things?’ ”**

In the New Testament, **“the Jews”** may refer to the entire Jewish nation, the residents of Jerusalem and surrounding territory, the authorities in Jerusalem, or merely those who were hostile to Jesus.

Most often in John’s Gospel, **“the Jews”** were those who opposed Jesus.

Presumably, the Levitical police of the temple reported what Jesus had done regarding the cleansing of the Court of the Gentiles to the Captain of the Guard. He in turn sought orders from the leaders of the Sanhedrin. Very quickly, Jesus was confronted by **“the Jews.”**

They demanded that Jesus give some authentication—some **“sign”**—for his cleansing of the temple. They wanted to know what Jesus’ authority was for doing what he did.

Rather than acknowledging that they had allowed practices contrary to the intention of the temple, the Jews sought justification by demanding a **sign** from Jesus.

Jesus’ action in cleansing the temple hardened rather than softened their hearts.

In verse 19, we read, **“Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’ ”**

That seems like a strange answer from Jesus. I am sure that the Jewish authorities were scratching their heads. What did Jesus mean?

The word **“destroy”** (*lulate*) is imperative in Greek. Literally, it reads, “You destroy.” Jesus was not commanding the Jews to destroy the temple. Rather, Jesus was using it rhetorically as a condition.

In other words, Jesus was saying, “If you destroy this temple, in three days I will raise it up.”

Later, false witnesses against Jesus said that he claimed that he himself would destroy the temple ([Matthew 26:61](#); [Mark 14:58](#)).

Even at his crucifixion, those who passed by derided him with the same false accusation that he would destroy the temple ([Matthew 27:40](#); [Mark 15:29](#)).

But Jesus did not say, “I destroy.” Rather, he said, “You destroy.”

What was Jesus talking about?

Jesus was referring to his own body. He was referring to his own body as a temple. He was referring to his own future crucifixion and resurrection.

The Jews would destroy his body but in three days God would raise him back to life again.

Verse 20 states, **“The Jews then said, ‘It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?’ ”**

Clearly, the Jews misunderstood Jesus. They still thought that he was referring to the physical temple.

The sentence in the original Greek could be interpreted to mean that the temple was still under construction rather than being completed in forty-six years.

The first-century historian Josephus (*Antiquities*, 15.380) says that construction on the temple began in the eighteenth year of Herod the Great (around 19 BC) and was not completed until the reign of Herod Agrippa (63 AD). That means that parts of the temple were still under construction in Jesus’ day.

The point is that the Jews misunderstood Jesus’ comment about which temple was going to be destroyed and raised up. So, John provided a helpful clarification in verse 21, **“But he [that is, Jesus] was speaking about the temple of his body.”**

Jesus was speaking about his own death and resurrection.

[John 2:22](#) states, **“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.”**

This sentence follows the account of Jesus’ discussion with the Jewish authorities who had questioned Jesus about cleansing the temple. Jesus had said, “[You] destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” The Jews thought that Jesus was referring to the stone temple, but Jesus was speaking about the temple of his body.

Before Jesus was arrested, he gave some final instructions to his disciples. One of the things Jesus said was, “But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father

will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you” ([John 14:26](#)).

After Jesus’ death and resurrection, the disciples remembered the discussion that Jesus had with the Jewish authorities when he cleansed the temple. They remembered that he had predicted his resurrection.

Therefore, they believed what Jesus had said about his resurrection and also how his statement was a fulfillment of Scripture (most likely [Psalm 16:10](#)).

So, what exactly was Jesus’ second sign? Jesus was teaching the Jews that it had to do with his own body and not the physical temple. Three days after Jesus’ death he would be raised back to life again.

The sign is that Jesus is the new temple. He would demonstrate that truth by his resurrection three days after his death.

Well, what does that sign mean?

Jesus was teaching that he is the new temple.

Now what is a temple? The temple is where God met with his people.

Solomon built the first temple but it was destroyed.

A second temple was built and that is the temple that Jesus visited in Jerusalem.

God’s presence was said to dwell in the temple. People had to come from all over the world to meet with God, to pray to him, and to offer sacrifices to him.

Jesus was saying that his death and resurrection would do away with the physical temple.

He will be the ultimate and final sacrifice for his people.

No longer will people need to go to a physical temple to worship God.

Because Jesus is the new temple, people who are “in Christ” will be able to worship God anywhere in the world. No longer will they need to go to the temple in Jerusalem to worship God.

Conclusion

The second sign of Jesus in [John 2:12-22](#) calls us to believe that Jesus is the new temple by his death and resurrection.

The movie *Braveheart* is an epic historical drama starring Mel Gibson as Sir William Wallace. Set in the late 13th and early 14th century, Wallace was one of the main leaders during the First War of Scottish Independence.

Wallace was eventually captured and handed over to King Edward I of England. Wallace was tried and found guilty of high treason.

He was told to submit to the king of England. He refused to do so.

So, Wallace was disemboweled alive. Even then, Wallace refused to submit to the king.

The watching crowd was deeply moved by Wallace's valor.

The magistrate offered Wallace one final chance, asking him to utter the word "Mercy" and he would be granted a quick death.

Instead, Wallace summoned all his remaining strength and with a great cry, shouted, "Freedom!"

Jesus came to bring freedom to sinners. The freedom Jesus brought was from sin and Satan and eternal condemnation in hell.

Jesus' death and resurrection three days later was the sign that showed the world that he is indeed the Christ, the Son of God, and the only Savior of sinners.

Will you trust Jesus today? Amen.