

# Jesus cleanses the Temple

## Introduction

“Gentle Jesus meek and mild” was the first line of one of Charles Wesley’s many hymns, that has become a children’s favourite. Was Wesley having an ‘off day’ when he described Jesus like this? No. All three words gentle, meek and mild have all changed their meaning since Wesley’s day; giving an image today of an inoffensive, insipid, passive, weak person rather than the dynamic powerful person that Jesus was. Who would want to follow a gentle Jesus meek and mild in the 21st C? In 1999 a poster depicting Jesus was distributed similar to the Che Guevara poster with the caption Meek? Mild? As if!

Jesus was never violent, not did he condone violence, as we see when the disciples wanted to call down fire on the Samaritans or when Peter drew his sword in Gethsemane and chopped off a servant’s ear, which Jesus promptly reattached! But did Jesus ever get angry? Yes he did. And so does God. Look at the verse printed in your N&N “*The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness...*” Wrath is intense anger! God gets extremely angry at sin and ungodliness and unrighteousness; and so did Jesus who was both God and man.

We get angry primarily at things that hurt us, offend us or attack us. It is a common reaction of human beings, rooted in our sense of self-esteem or self-worth. Many things anger us although we do a very good job of hiding our anger, as displays of anger are not socially accepted, and so we repress them, internalise them and push our anger down deep inside us where it very often turns into physical ailments such as ulcers or back pain or other more insidious conditions. In which case we need to recognise our internal anger and come to God for his healing.

Jesus was a man, fully and completely but he didn’t suppress his emotions. The story we are going to read shows him expressing anger. But it was not anger because of something done against him; just look at the cross. Jesus didn’t once show anger at the despicable unjust way he was treated there. **“What Makes Jesus Angry?”** This is my subtitle to this message on Jesus Cleansing the Temple. Let’s turn to **John 2:13-25**.

## Background

Jesus had been home to Galilee to attend a wedding in Cana with his family. Where he turned the water into wine. They all stayed on in Capernaum for a few days before Jesus and his disciples returned to Jerusalem, in Judea, for his first Passover since he was baptised and anointed with the Holy Spirit.

Jesus would have certainly gone up to the Jerusalem many times before at Passover. Originally the people would have brought sacrifices from the best of their own flocks and herd, and some still did; but so often the priestly inspectors would find some blemish with their animal that they were obliged to sell their ‘unfit’ animal to local butchers at a knock down price and then buy certified animals from those selling bullocks, lambs and doves for sacrificing at an exorbitant price in the outer court of the Temple itself.

There were also the moneychangers. Most currencies of those days (like today) bore the image of the emperor, king or other ruler. To the Jews this was a graven image, which was not permitted in the temple or as an offering, as that would be offensive to the Lord. So special temple money had been coined and moneychangers, for a fee, would change all these pagan

coins into money that was acceptable to God. Those selling their animals within the temple precincts, of course, could not accept any currency other than the temple coins. So there was a double mark up for these ordinary people who wanted to celebrate Passover. They had come to worship the Lord, to thank him for the day of their deliverance from Egypt and to offer sacrifices for their sins.

### **What Makes Jesus Angry?**

Jesus had seen this many times before. So why did it so anger him now? This was his first Passover since being filled with the Holy Spirit. One of the things the Holy Spirit does in person is to fill them with FIRE. We see the fire of the Holy Spirit at work when Ananias and Sapphira lied about the amount of their gift to the work of the church and were both struck dead. We see his fire at work when Elymas the Magician tried to turn the proconsul away from the faith and Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, fixed his gaze on him, and said, *"You who are full of all deceit and fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease to make crooked the straight ways of the Lord? Now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and not see the sun for a time."* And immediately a mist and darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking those who would lead him by the hand. Then the proconsul believed when he saw what had happened, being amazed at the teaching of the Lord." Acts 13:9.

Similarly here we see the zeal of the Lord of Hosts burning in the Lord Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit. He makes a whip out of short cords and drives the animals out of the temple court and overturns the tables of the moneychangers and tells those with baskets full of doves and pigeons to *'get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father's house into a market.'* There is a fury, a holy indignation that makes him react in this way and turn out those selling within the environs of this temple built for the worship of God.

This event recorded by John happened at the beginning of Jesus' three years ministry. Which is confirmed in the passage. The temple had begun to be built by Herod the Great at the end of 20 BC. This is now 46 years later, which makes this early in 27 AD when Jesus was just over 30 years old and had just begun his ministry. The temple was not completed until 63 AD.

### **The Second Cleaning of the Temple**

Three years later Jesus would repeat exactly the same 'cleansing' again at his fourth and final Passover visit to Jerusalem, in AD 30, as we find recorded towards the end of the three other gospels. This second time he made no whip as he drove out the merchants and turned over the tables and he used it as an opportunity to address the crowds *"And as he taught them, he said, 'Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers'."* The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching". He did not act out of anger as we see this first time, but in a way calculated to provoke the Jewish authorities to whom he had now become quite infamous. And the reaction of the authorities on each occasion was quite different. On this first occasion they didn't yet know who this Jesus of Nazareth was. *"What sign can you show us as your authority to do this?"* was all he was asked. There was an underlying question, are you the Messiah we have been waiting for all these years? And he gave a very odd answer, so odd that some even remembered it three years later and quoted it at his trial, although the various witnesses couldn't fully agree. *"Destroy this temple and I will raise it up again in three days."*

*The Jews replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" But the temple he had spoken of was his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.*

Sadly the wonderful temple, which had actually become more a memorial to the wealth and pride of the Herod family than a place of honour to God, was totally razed to the ground, in 70 AD with not one stone left upon another, just seven years after it had been completed. This was exactly as Jesus later prophesied (Mark 13) and was fulfilled exactly 40 years after Jesus death and resurrection, 40 years of grace, a period of testing like the 40 years in the wilderness during which the Jews were given an opportunity to repent and accept their Messiah. But they didn't repent and wouldn't accept Jesus as Messiah, and so the Romans destroyed the temple and almost a million Jews were slaughtered. The temple has never been rebuilt and I do not believe God will ever allow it to be rebuilt, and I do not accept the interpretations that some give to various OT prophecies. If the temple was rebuilt and sacrifices reinstated I believe that would totally dishonour and nullify the death and resurrection of Jesus!

### **God's House**

When the disciples saw Jesus' anger and saw how he acted, they remembered the scripture "*Zeal for your **house** will consume me, the reproaches of those who reproach you, have fallen on me.*" Ps 69:9 As John Piper expressed it "*Jesus was consumed with zeal for his Father's house. And reproaches were, no doubt, raining down on him like torrents: "What in God's name do you think you are doing?!"*" They would have been very upset by his actions, driving animals out of the temple and scattering their coins all over the floor – it was going to take some sorting out and clearing up and undoubtedly led to some pretty violent arguments between these moneychangers!

Superficially it appears that Jesus is upset at the way that the **temple** is being used. But Jesus isn't passionate about buildings. He is passionate about his Father and the worship given to his Father. So whatever 'Zeal for your house' means, it is not about the temple buildings. As Solomon observed when he built the first temple, "*But who is able to build him a house, since heaven, even highest heaven, cannot contain him? Who am I to build a house for him, except as a place to make offerings before him?"* 2 Chron 2:6. The only value of the temple is that it gave the worshippers somewhere to worship, somewhere to make their offerings to the Lord, to burn sacrifices and incense. Herod's temple didn't even have the Ark of the Covenant behind the curtain of the most holy place. No Herod's temple was singularly lacking the presence of God.

As Paul told the intelligentsia of Athens "*The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.*" Acts 17:24-25

Jesus did not cast out the animals and the moneychangers because he was angry that the temple was his Father's House, a holy place being used as a cattle market! It was not the **place** that was important to Jesus. No, what angered Jesus was seeing all these ordinary Jewish folk coming to worship the Lord according to the rules prescribed in the OT, and seeing the priests who were supposed to be their shepherds ripping them off under the guise of providing them with acceptable sacrifices! What was meant to be a means of worshipping God had been turned

into a means of gain and the priests were not acting as priests of the LORD but of Mammon. They loved money rather than God. They worshipped profit not Jehovah. Jesus' spirit was stirred to indignation as he saw worshippers coming to worship God being ripped off by the moneychangers and then being ripped off again by the animal traders and the inspectors, while the priest got their cut. How dare they turn the worship of God into a means of getting wealth while God's people were often paying more than they could really afford to feed their greed? The priests had become wealthy, not just earning an average wage and making ends meet like most other people, not unlike some modern day TV evangelists who promise 'God will give you loads of money if you send \$100 to my ministry'.

Christ's passion and zeal was the worship of his Father. Every human being is a worshipper. But what or who do we worship? If we are not loving and worshipping the LORD then we will substitute this true worship for something else; material possessions, wealth, money, prestige, status; these are often the things that we can put in the place of the true worship of God just like the Jewish leaders had done. But it could be anything else like family, friends, our jobs, what other people think of us, or things like music, big cars, pop idols, sports idols! So many other things can become the objects of our worship rather than the Lord, who alone is worthy of our praise and adoration. As Paul put it "*exchanging the truth of God for a lie, they worshiped and served **created things** rather than the **Creator—who is forever praised.** Amen."* Rom 1:25

Is there anything in our lives that makes Jesus mad? Anything that makes him angry, livid, furious? There could be. He loves us like a father love his own children. But love doesn't stop us being angry. Children often make parents angry, even though we love them. Perhaps the more we really love them the angrier they make us when we see their sin leading them to make self-destructive decisions. At the end of this passage we read that Jesus knows what is in our hearts and he does not trust us. But even though he doesn't trust us and knows just how sinful we are he loved us enough to die on a cross for us!

### **What Sign?**

These Jews ask for a miracle, a sign of his authority to do such things and he responds by referring, somewhat cryptically, to his own resurrection in three years time. This was the greatest miraculous sign of his authority; they would destroy his body, which he refers to as 'this temple', but God would raise him from the dead and his physical body would not see decay but in three days would be raised again to life. That is some sign of authority isn't it? Yet ironically this prediction of his resurrection was the very statement used against him in his trial three years later by some rather confused witnesses.

The Good News is this: Jesus knows what is in each of our hearts, consequently he does not trust us, but he loves us and longs that we become worshippers, not having to offer sacrifices at great personal expense like these worshippers in Jesus' time. No he offers us a new way to come to God freely, without effort, without having to try to please God, which we can never do. Forgiveness has got to be a free gift, we could never earn it, so all we have to do is accept it humbly and gratefully. The greatest miraculous sign was the resurrection, and again and again this has changed people's lives, as they have moved across from death to life, simply by believing that Jesus was the one who paid the price for all our sins and rose from the dead and is alive from the dead now and forever. Do you know this new life?