

John 3:13-22

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[0 : 00] And, um, turn if you will to our main text for this evening, which is John, the Gospel! of John chapter 2, verses 13 to 22, which I think is page 887 in your Bibles. It's 888 in mind. So if you're not there, it's just on the other side. But that's John chapter 2, verse 13.

I'm starting verse 13. The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found those who were selling oxen, 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 the oxen. And he pulled 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. And his disciples remembered that it was written, Zeal for your house will consume me. So the Jews said to him, What sign do you show us for doing these things?

And Jesus asked them, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. The Jews then said, It's taken 46 years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?

But he was speaking about the temple of his body. 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. So as you might have gathered, there's really two readings tonight.

The first one was Psalm 69, but it's repeated here. And here is a very different in tone from that Psalm, a very dramatic and rather action-packed episode in the life of Jesus' ministry or the start of Jesus' ministry. And it's not a coincidence that it comes at the start of Jesus' ministry.

[2 : 06] If you look a few verses before, there's the miracle at the wedding of Cana, and then this cleansing of the temple. Two, in some ways, contrasting signs, miracles. We can call them both miracles. But two signs that encapsulate really what Jesus came to do, what Christ's mission was about. So although we don't often look at this cleansing of the temple, and there is, I think, something for all of us that perhaps leaves us a little bit disturbed or uncomfortable about what goes on here. It is nevertheless of very great importance to understanding the meaning of what Christ came to do. And I want to direct our attention particularly tonight to that verse in verse 17 in John chapter 2. His disciples remembered that it was written, Zeal for your house will consume me. Now zeal is not a word we tend to use very often, and when you last used it. Zeal or zealous is not something I use terribly often, certainly within contemporary culture today. And if we did use it, we would use it generally with, I think, rather negative connotations. I was looking through my bookshelf and my DVD collection to try and find some examples, positive examples of zeal in there. And I think the closest I came to at one point was Dorothy and the Wizard of Oz, you know, follow the yellow brick road and all that, which didn't really,

I didn't think in the end, worked for me. Because in truth, most of the characters that exhibit zeal that we watch or read about or think about are generally the baddies or at the very least the flawed heroes. So instead of Dorothy, you can have, for example, Darth Vader or the Emperor in Star Wars, that kind of relentless zeal for domination, for power. Or I suppose more recently, and particularly at, I guess, is Sauron in The Lord of the Rings, who is portrayed or embodied by this flaming eye that is always seeing, always on the lookout for any opposition to his power and his kind of lust for domination over Middle-earth. It's never sleeping, always flaming and always awake. And then there's another film as well, which pointed to another aspect, which we often, about zeal, particularly when it's associated with evil, is that it exhausts the good in other people and the good in other communities. So I don't know whether you've seen the film No Country for Old Men. It's set in West Texas and basically it's a story of an area, a community that is disintegrating under outside criminals or whatever. And there's this character there called Antoine Chigurh who is a hit man who's really not just a personification of evil, but he is, he's the devil really. And he goes around following this chaos and creating this chaos. And he is the sort of the embodiment of the arbitrary

and ruthless aspect of evil, evil, but also somebody enjoys it at the same time. It's cruel. And this man, to defeat him, also he utterly exhausts the goodwill and the good spirit of the people who are trying to stop him and the community that they're a part of. And that's why, as the name says, it becomes No Country for Old Men because it takes a tremendous energy out of them. But as I said, even for those good characters, zeal is not necessarily a good thing. One of my favourite television characters is George Smiley, played by Alec Guinness, the famous adaptation of the John le Carré novels about a spy who comes back to help his old sort of organisation to root out a mould. And so there's this battle of wits between him in London and various other places and his nemesis Carla in Moscow. And eventually George Smiley defeats.

Carla, he has to defect and he wins. But in doing so, although George Smiley is the moral centre of the story, the real moral man where all this corruption and treachery is going on around him, when he finally wins, there is a sense of emptiness and futility all of a sudden in his life because he realises he sacrificed his happiness, his future, his marriage because of his zeal, his obsession to bring this man down, to bring him, to defeat him.

So zeal and zealous are not words that we use very often when we're praising people. Sure, we have other words that we use these days. We might, people talk about a good thing that somebody has a passion, they have a passion for certain things, but as I say, we tend to say they have a passion for this or that. It doesn't quite have that all-encompassing, all-embracing, excuse me, this is just a justive kind of element that zeal would have. Another one you might hear that's sometimes indicative of zeal is intensity, which you often hear in a squirting context. So, for example, I follow rugby a lot, as I'm sure some of you do, and intensity there, as a word, is talked of with great reverence. The All Blacks from New Zealand, of course, are admired for their intensity, meaning that they don't just have the skills or the speed or the strength or the fitness, but whatever they do, they are not just going through the motions. They do everything as well as they can, as fast as they can, with as much impact as they can because they're focused on one thing, which All Blacks are always supposed to do, and that is to win. But again, however important that might be to Kiwis, it's only a game, it's only rugby. It doesn't encompass the whole of life. But here we have, in verse 17, a statement about Christ and about his zeal that doesn't talk about Christ's passion or his intensity, but it talks about his zeal, his zeal for your house, for God's house.

[8 : 10] And this word zeal, certainly in the Hebrew, is closely related to the word for fire or flame. And it's when we connect these two things that we begin to see a bit more about what Jesus' zeal is really about. It's not the zeal of a fanatic, which is another negative word we might put in the place of zeal. Churchill once said, one of my favourite quotes of many from Churchill, a fanatic isn't one who can't change his mind and won't change the subject.

But zeal here that Christ is displaying, this flame, if we link it with this image of fire, we can say it's an internal, heartfelt devotion that leads to action. The two things are not separated, it's all encompassing. Or more figuratively and accurately, given that the Bible uses it, it's an internal, holy fire that leads to actions that are intentional, dynamic, and as we see here, forceful. And the whole point of John's description of this event is to show us that Christ was not only displaying zeal in cleansing the temple, but that his whole life was one of zeal, zeal for God's house, of intentional, dynamic, and forceful actions that came from the fire that burned within him. And just to further emphasise the point, it won't be lost on you, there's a very close association in the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament, of fire and God himself. Think of Moses in the burning bush, the pillar of fire that led the Israelites through the wilderness, which Paul later tells us was Christ himself, the fire that Ezekiel saw around the throne of God in his vision, and the fire that touched Isaiah's lips and caused him to prophesy.

And of course, the fire that came down after Christ rose from the dead and ascended, Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came down on his church and rested there. So fire, we can say, figuratively, is an attribute of God. And so is zeal. The phrase, the zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this, occurs several times in the Old Testament, always in connection with the great saving actions of God for his people. And probably the most familiar one to us, it's probably, you're remembering it, I've heard that before somewhere, is Isaiah 9 and 7, where we read every Christmas, you know, the bit that says, for us to a child is born, to us a son is given, the government should be upon his shoulder, and his name should be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. And then that goes on, and then it ends, the zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. So zeal is an attribute of God. And perhaps it makes us feel a little better when it's associated with a baby in a

manger, rather than a man wielding a whip, as we read here, and overturning tables, and frankly carrying on in a way that might make us a bit nervous.

But it is the same zeal, for it is the same God. So we're going to draw out some of how Christ's zeal for the Lord's house here. It's shown in this passage in three ways. Firstly, his zeal for the pure and holy worship of God. Secondly, his zeal for all of God's people. And thirdly, his zeal for his people in his death. His zeal to make them a people for himself.

So firstly, a zeal for the pure worship of God. We might ask ourselves, why does Jesus have to act in this way? Why does he do such an outrageous and provocative thing? Because there's something, as I said, in all of us that just wants to say, what is Jesus up to here? What does he think he's doing? Why this violent, apparently uncontrolled, and somewhat brutal demonstration? [12:02] And to understand the primary, or you might say a surface meaning of Jesus' actions, we need to understand the context of it. Because this occasion, when Jesus chose to do this, was no accident.

As we read in verse 13, it was the Passover, the time of the Passover. And this was the highest festival of the Jews of the year. The high point of their religious calendar, celebrating the high point of God's relationship with his people, their rescue from slavery in Egypt and their deliverance to the Promised Land. And everybody would have been there in Jerusalem. It would have been packed. There would have been Jews from all around Palestine. There would have been Jews from the wider empire. And there would have been Gentiles also. We know that there were Gentiles, Greeks and Romans, who were interested in the monotheistic God, the one God that the Jews worshipped, in contrast to the many gods that were in the empire. So Jerusalem was packed.

The streets would have been packed. The temple would have been packed. So the first thing to note is that Jesus does this on a very significant occasion, and a very public one too. The timing is no coincidence. And of course, as I said, it was the busiest time of the year for the temple. And John describes here a temple that is catering to the religious needs of the worshippers. That's all that's going on in one sense here, with these sheep and cattle and birds and the money changers. Because the religion of the Jews in the Old Testament demanded sacrifices. There wasn't anything wrong in that. In fact, it was said that in the great temple of Jerusalem, one of the wonders of the ancient world, the smoke from the sacrifices that went up never ceased day and night. And given this need for animal sacrifices, of course, it made sense to have them near the temple, so that people could buy and transport the animals that they were going to sacrifice as their religious duty easily. And as for the presence of the money changers, well, there was an annual tax that needed to be paid by every Jewish male. They had to pay it out every year. And very often they do it when they came up for the Passover. But you couldn't pay it in any ordinary money. No, you had to pay it in special coinage, but a higher purity of silver in it. And hence people would need to change the money. Now the point I'm trying to make here is these are things that people, that Jews, needed to do if they were to fulfill their religious duty. They weren't doing anything that God had not commanded them to do. So from one point of view, it was not unreasonable to have this activity going on, at least in close proximity to the temple. And nor is there here, as you might have heard, sometimes in connection with any hint of corruption or anything wrong with trade or anything like that, although sometimes money changers did charge up to 12.5% commission apparently. But that's not the point of what Jesus is saying. It's not an ethical problem that Jesus is pointing out here. His objections here are primarily, and almost solely, you can say religious. And this is our first point, really, our first application as well. Jesus here is concerned for the truthfulness and purity of the worship of God, not necessarily our ethics in how they trade or whatever. And this meant that worship was to be from the heart, even when done in a formal or a communal way, as it was done through the sacrifice in the temple there. But to look deeper, there are a series of kind of nudges that John gives us in this passage, to look deeper, to try and understand more fully.

And there are three Old Testament passages really connected with this incident. There's actually probably more than that, but three in the main that show the full meaning, bring out the full meaning of what Christ is doing here and the zeal for God's house. So the first nudge that John gives us, as far as the desire for pure worship of God is concerned, is that this episode is a fulfillment of a prophecy in Malachi. If you just turn there with me quickly, it's Malachi chapter 3, verses 1 to 4, page 802. Malachi chapter 3, page 802.

[16:15] 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? Who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire, and like full of soap. He will sit as a refiner and a 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. And so we see here very obvious references to what Jesus did in cleansing the temple. He would come suddenly to his temple, and there's no doubt that the people there would have felt that this was rather sudden. It feels sudden to us in the context of the gospel. Secondly, that this was good news. You see that in verse 1, it says the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight is something to rejoice in. This is good news. And more specifically, it goes on to say he will purify the worship of the temple, and redirect the worship of God to worship that was pure, and as it says, bring offerings in righteousness. So worship that was righteous and pure. And this takes us back to that point I made about zeal, that is intentional, dynamic action, but that comes from a heartfelt, consuming, burning knowledge of God, of who he is, and what he's done for his people. So as I say, the temple system wasn't so much wrong in what it did in terms of sacrifice, and people worshipping God like that. It's just it didn't proceed from a heartfelt devotion to God. It didn't come from the heart. And the outward worship of God, that whole sacrificial system, had taken over from the inward knowledge and the delight in the inward knowledge of God, and of what he'd done for his people, of his holiness and his great mercy. And surely one of the first ways we can apply this to ourselves is to admit that this is all too easy. As Christians, we know what the worship of God looks like, don't we? It looks like going to church, it looks like praying, it looks like reading the Bible, helping others, singing hymns, meeting together. But when any of these things become disassociated from what we know of God, then they become empty and futile.

They should be a response, always, to our knowledge and love of God. And they can become dead and formal with little joy. Or they can be done for other reasons other than that heartfelt devotion to God. We could go to church because it's good for our children, for example. Or we sing hymns, not for praise to God, but because that's just what we do. Everybody else is doing it. We pray because we feel we ought to. We serve others through guilt or whatever. Could go on, couldn't we?

And of course we should be concerned with living our whole lives in worship to God. But there is a point, this is a point in the Gospel where it's one of the few places where Jesus addresses the institutional, communal, slightly formal side of religion. And we shouldn't just pass that by, I don't think. Jesus isn't doing away with the formal worship of God. What he wants to do is restore it in its truest sense. He wants to fulfill it, most obviously in his death and resurrection.

And he wants to reconnect the outward worship of God with the knowledge and the love of God. The Puritan Jeremiah Burroughs said, It is not enough for you to come and sit in a pew and have the sound of a man's voice in your ears, but your soul must be at work.

And so this is the challenge for us, isn't it? To connect what we know and love inwardly of God with what we do in worship. And show forth this, because this is zeal. This is zeal for God's house.

[20 : 18] And secondly, moving on, we see also, if we look deeper again, the zeal that Christ has for his people. We pick up on another one of John's nudges to look deeper, to look further.

And we see that Jesus connects the knowledge and love of God with the mission of God's people. With the mission of God's people. He has a zeal for the people of God in that sense.

And the zeal for God's people that Jesus had encompassed two aspects, I think. First is the who, and the second is the how. Christ, in cleansing the temple, is showing us who is God's people, who are they going to be.

And secondly, he's showing how that people will become truly God's people, to be reconciled to him. Which, of course, is through his death, where Jesus most clearly shows a zeal for the Lord's house.

But firstly, who? We've already mentioned the religious problem of the merchants and the money changers setting up shop in the temple. But there was a further and perhaps deeper problem of where they had done this and why they had done it.

[21 : 22] In terms of the purpose that God had for his people, for Israel. Because the temple trade did not always take place in the temple. It was quite a recent event.

The temple court is this vast, huge courtyard outside the main temple buildings. Apparently it had space for 210,000 worshippers.

Enormous space. So this was filled with all what was going on there. But it had only moved in there relatively recently, about 40 or 50 years before this incident. Because before it used to take place

on the Mount of Olives.

Close by enough to make it, as I say, to facilitate the sacrifice that was required. But also not actually in the temple itself. And there was reasons why this happened.

Largely to do with power and influence among the religious authorities. Which we don't have time to go into. But when this great bustling noisy trade moved from there and moved into the court of the temple.

[22 : 21] It moved into the outer court, which was also known as the court of the Gentiles. The court of the Gentiles was where non-Jews, as I said, those who were supposed to be attracted to God.

By its history, its law, its worship. This is where they were supposed to come to worship and pray to God. They weren't allowed to go into the inner temple. That was only for Jews only.

But they were allowed to pray and to worship in the outer court. But now we see instead of this, this vast area, which was supposed to be for all the peoples of the earth, is instead taken up with the noise of cattle.

And the bleating of sheep and the fluttering of birds. The bustle of exchange and the clink of coins in this very large area. So there's an awful lot of ground. And that's just the noise and what you can see.

Those of you who know anything about farm animals, well, the smell, I wouldn't like to hazard. But it was completely transformed from a place where you could worship to a place where you could trade.

[23 : 21] And by so, it basically was effectively saying that this is a place only for Jews. Only for Jews to sacrifice for the people of Israel. And as I said, Jesus doesn't have anything to say against the sacrifices themselves.

They weren't, he sacrificed at the temple himself, most likely. He focuses dramatic action on clearing this vast area, the court of the Gentiles.

And incidentally, this is why he would have needed a whip. And why he makes a whip, of course. If any of you have ever tried to move large and kind of massive animals through narrow streets or anything, you will realize you need something to herd them with, to beat them with.

It's not necessarily that he was beating the traders. Though we don't know he didn't. But it's really, you know, he needs to move all these livestock out of the court. He clears this entire vast area out into the streets.

You can imagine the commotion. But the focus on the traders as well, in the courts of the Gentiles, is again a fulfillment of an Old Testament prophecy. One of those nudges that John is giving us.

[24 : 25] So let's look at Zechariah chapter 14, verse 21, page 800. Zechariah chapter 14, verse 21.

It reads, And every cross in Jerusalem and Judah shall be holy to the Lord of hosts, so that all who sacrifice may come and take of them and boil the meat of the sacrifice in them.

And there shall no longer be a trader in the house of the Lord of hosts on that day. There will no longer be a trader in the house of the Lord on that day.

So you see the very obvious reference to what Jesus is doing here. But if you glance, we don't have time to read them all, but if you glance from page, sorry, from verse 16 further on down, you'll see that this passage in Zechariah is really talking about how the peoples of the earth, all peoples from the Gentiles will come up to the temple to worship God, come to Jerusalem to worship God.

It talks about all nations, all the nations in verse 16, the families of the earth to worship the King and the Lord of hosts. It's a vision of all the peoples of the earth coming to worship God.

[25 : 43] And the fact that there will be no more traders in the house on that day is really a sign that this is happening, that this has come to pass. This is what's going to happen now.

This is the time. It is the time for the fulfillment of God's purposes for all of those in the earth. And this puts a different emphasis, doesn't it, on Jesus' actions in the temple in clearing the court of the Gentiles.

He is, in effect, rebuking Israel for trying to narrow the purposes of God for his people and excluding the Gentiles from the worship of God.

But he's also announcing that the time of God's covenant, when God's covenant will include all peoples. Remember in Malachi he was called the messenger of the covenant will come to the temple.

It will include all the peoples of the earth. So Jesus' anger and criticism in the court of the Gentiles is really focused on the fact that the Jewish religion had narrowed the focus of their religion to their own ideas of purpose.

[26 : 47] And those own ideas of purpose were becoming more and more superficial and futile and narrow. And they've forgotten the purposes that God had for Israel, that God speaks.

Obviously we've seen in Zechariah that it was foretold in the Old Testament that Israel would come to expand all the peoples of the earth, that Israel was supposed to attract the other nations to them, to worship God.

And he's really saying, declaring by his actions, that the covenant people will include all peoples. They will worship together as equal children of God. And again, just briefly in passing, this is a danger for us too, isn't it?

To narrow our view of church, of Christianity, of what we believe. To really to narrow our view of the purpose that God has for his people, for us as a church.

We need always to be aware, I think, of the role of this church in the wider purposes of God and in his wider church. We say no more at the moment, but how many churches have you seen that simply become a club for like-minded people?

[27 : 57] That's effectively what was happening in the temple there. It's what Jesus was rebuking them for very sternly indeed. But as I said, that was the who, so it's to include all Gentiles.

The how, again, we see in John there. He's going to talk, also give intimation signs of the how. All peoples will become part of the covenant.

All peoples will become part of God's people. Of course, Jesus makes this more explicit in the verses that come afterwards where he talks about his body becoming a temple and his death.

But there is, again, another note that we've already heard of our reading in Psalm 69 and that we just turned back there and that is referenced in verse 17.

His disciples remember that it was written, Zeal for your house will consume me. That's Psalm 69. You can turn there if you like, but we're not going to look at it in too much detail, but that's taken straight from there.

[29 : 01] But you would have been aware, I think, listening to it earlier, that Psalm 69 is really a reference. It's really talking about Jesus, isn't it? It was really, there were several kind of aspects that we pick up.

It's one of John's favourite psalms. It's referenced three times in his Gospel. And there were several references. It's really about Jesus, about Jesus' death. And so when the disciples remember here this verse, this first half of verse 9 of Psalm 69, For zeal of your house has consumed me.

We can see that Jesus' zeal for God not just consumed him, that he acted in this way, but they're also looking, you can see it consumes him in another way.

The wider context of the psalm makes this clear for us. The Lord's zeal was not confined to that moment in clearing the temple of the Gentiles. In fact, it was seen most clearly in the zeal that he had for God's house, for God's people, that it enabled him to redeem them.

To die a death, alone and abandoned, in pain and humiliation, in all innocence and guiltlessness, in our place. So John is saying that the disciples saw in one way that zeal of the Lord would consume him, and in another way, later, they became aware that zeal for the Lord's house would consume him utterly.

[30 : 30] And it's something, as I say, you can see in verse 22, that they remember, they put the whole thing together. It's an odd passage in that way, in that we sort of hear the disciples looking back and understanding both the scripture, it says in verse 22, and the word that Jesus has spoken, which gives us, that impetus, I think, to look deeper, to look in the Old Testament, to see what's going on here.

But this is really talking about, when we ponder this passage, the core of what Christ's zeal is, his sacrifice and rejection in our place. This is the end of Jesus' heartfelt desire, expressed intentionally, dynamically, and forcefully, that defeated death, and sin, and the devil.

And that his temple was to be destroyed, consumed, we might say, and in three days raised up.

And that Jesus' concern, his zeal is for the Lord's people, rather than the bricks and mortar of the temple, is clear from the fact that Psalm 69, written prophetically by David, he's talked about, David is talking about his zeal for the house of the Lord, because the temple hadn't even been built then.

It was only going to be built by his son Solomon. A few decades later. So when he's talking about the zeal for the Lord's house, as Paul has made clear about the sermons, his sermons about Timothy, it's God's household, God's people he's talking about.

And we can say here, God's church, and also that he himself is the temple, Jesus himself is the temple. And like David, Jesus shares the desire of God for his glory to be displayed in the church, among his people.

[32 : 15] There's one writer put it, when writing about Psalm 69, and it's linked with John 2, about the way that the people become a people, and how God is glorified through that, how the two things are linked.

He said, in this way, in this way, God gives remarkable proof of his love for us. Because he unites his glory, as it were, by an indissoluble link with our salvation.

So he unites his glory, as it were, by an indissoluble link with our salvation. And that indissoluble link is Christ. Through his body, he has united the glory of God and his people with their salvation. And that is what he is zealous for, what he shows the zeal for here. And Christ's zeal did not end at the cross, didn't end when he ascended into heaven.

We read in the early chapters of Revelation that he walked still amongst his church, counselling them, rebuking them. And he's described there in many ways, but some of them are, kind of give us a feeling of that, slight uncomfortable feeling when we read this cleansing of the temple.

[33 : 22] It's called, the first and the last who died and came to life. He who has the sharp two-edged sword, or is one who has eyes like a flame of fire. He's also the one in Revelation who stands at the door and not desiring fervently to have fellowship, to eat with his people, to have fellowship with his people.

His concern, his zeal, is still for his people. A zeal for God's glory to be shown in God's people. And it is a zeal, as I said, that comes from that inner fire, a knowledge and love of God inwardly that led to intentional, dynamic, and forceful action outwardly.

outwardly. Zeal for the Lord's house will consume you. It consumed him, didn't it, during that Passover in the temple in the court of the Gentiles. It consumed him during another Passover, nailed to a cross, alone on a hill.

And it consumes him still. I guess the big question is, does it consume us? And it is a big question. Does what we have experienced for God's mercy and grace, of his holiness and truth, does that so burn within us that we share with Christ a zeal for God's glory to be displayed in God's people, for a true and pure worship of God, for the purposes of God and of his people in all the world, and a zeal that leads to sacrificial service to God and his people, of a dying to sin, a taking up of our cross daily.

So let us pray that the Holy Spirit would lead us and stir us up with that fire, that the zeal of Christ would be shown in all our lives. And really, when I was thinking about this sermon, and it really convicted me that I myself, and I don't think I'm alone in this, are so far from that kind of zeal and that kind of connection between what we know of God and what we do in our lives, that it almost leads you to a kind of despair and it throws you on Christ.

[35 : 31] So what we're going to do now to finish is, we'll stand and sing our last hymn.