

## **Bible - General Questions**

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### **What Happened When Jesus Cleansed the Temple?**

By Dr. Paul M. Elliott

**A reader asks, "Did Jesus cleanse the Temple once, or twice? Did He actually go into the Temple to do this, or was it someplace nearby?" The Bible tells us that Jesus did this not once, but twice. And because of the area involved and the purpose for which it was being used, what He did was the work of a "man's man."**

#### **Two Temple Cleansings at Different Times**

The better-known account of Jesus' cleansing the Temple is recorded in Luke 19:45-48, and in parallel accounts in Matthew 21:12-13 and Mark 11:15-17. The event occurs on the day after Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem:

Then He went into the Temple and began to drive out those who bought and sold in it, saying to them, "It is written, 'My house is a house of prayer,' but you have made it a 'den of thieves.' " And He was teaching daily in the Temple. But the chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people sought to destroy Him, and were unable to do anything; for all the people were very attentive to hear Him.

However, we know from John 2:13-16 that this was not the first time Jesus had cleansed the Temple. John records that He also did it at the beginning of His public ministry. Now, three years later, He is doing it again at the end of His ministry. He comes to the Temple area on the Monday after His Palm Sunday entry into Jerusalem.

#### **The Temple Area: No Small Place**

To understand both accounts, we need to understand what went on in the Temple area. The area to which Luke 19:45 refers was the Court of the Gentiles. This was a large outer court where devout Gentiles, who could not come into the Temple proper, could come to pray and to worship at a distance. But they were forbidden, on pain of death, to come any closer.

The Court of the Gentiles was actually far larger than the Temple building itself, and its Inner Court, which were restricted to the Jews. Historical writings at the time of Christ tell us that the area occupied by Herod's Temple and its courts was over 35 acres, and the Court of the Gentiles occupied about 10 acres of that space. Modern archaeological excavations have confirmed this. So the area that Jesus cleansed was no small place.

### **A Place of Prayer Turned Into a Livestock Market**

What was the intended purpose of this area? It was supposed so be a quiet area, an area devoted to prayer and the worship of God.

But what was going on in this area of the Temple in Jesus' day? The Levites had turned it into an animal market. Jews who came from outlying parts of Israel or from foreign lands, who came to worship and offer sacrifices at the Temple, would wait until they got to Jerusalem to buy sacrificial animals to offer. They were doing this as a matter of convenience. It was too much trouble to bring animals on the trip with them.

So the Temple area itself, particularly the Court of the Gentiles, had become the animal market. Keep in mind that tens of thousands of Jews came to Jerusalem for Passover and the feasts that followed (Unleavened Bread and Pentecost). And because many of these people were Jews coming from foreign countries, they had to change their foreign money into local currency in order to buy an animal. So there were money-changers at the Temple — people who exchanged foreign currency. In other words, bankers.

We're told in contemporary records, by Josephus and others, that the family of the high priest ran this commercial operation. They had gone into the cattle and banking

businesses. They sold sacrificial animals in the Court of the Gentiles at premium prices. And just like your local bank today, they charged heavy transaction fees for exchanging money.

So picture this: The Temple area, a ten-acre space that is supposed to be a quiet place of prayer and worship, is filled with stalls of buying animals and their refuse, possibly thousands of shouting people, and no doubt arguments about prices. Instead of quiet, prayer, and worship, there is noise and chaos.

### **No Small Task**

What did Jesus do? The Gospel accounts tell us that He threw out those who bought and sold, and overturned the tables of the moneychangers. The force of the original language is that He did it violently, and with anger.

Now this was no small task. Think of the size of the area. Think of the amount of buying and selling that was going on. Think of this one man, the Son of God, driving out these merchants, and their animals, and turning over the bankers' tables. And as He did it He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations', but you have made it a 'den of thieves.' " He was quoting from Isaiah and Jeremiah.

### **Jesus Christ: A Mighty Man**

These accounts tell us of the holiness of God, the reverence He is due in worship, the irreverent perversion of that worship by the Jewish rulers, and the fulfillment of prophecy concerning the Messiah's zeal for the house of God. But the Temple cleansing accounts also tell us something else important about our Lord himself. Sometimes Jesus is depicted in paintings — and today in motion pictures and on television — as a weak character. Almost effeminate. But these accounts put the lie to that idea, and confirm another point of prophecy.

The man who cleansed the Temple was a man's man. He was physically capable of single-handedly driving out the merchants, the moneychangers, and their merchandise.

The Lord Jesus Christ was a mighty man, like David of old, who said in Psalm 18, "By You I can run against a troop. By my God I can leap over a wall." Jesus Christ is truly the Son of David. He was a mighty man of valor. Our God is the mighty God, not a weakling.

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