

Jesus' Early Ministry in Jerusalem (John 2:13-3:36)

Author: Dr. David Turner

Session 5

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Keywords

Temple Cleansing, Nicodemus, New Birth, Water and Spirit, Agency of Jesus, John the Baptist, Signs Faith, Realized Eschatology, Covenant Purification

Abstract

This lecture by Dr. David Turner examines Jesus' early ministry in Jerusalem, specifically focusing on the theological significance of the Temple cleansing and the nighttime dialogue with Nicodemus. Turner argues that John's chronological placement of the Temple incident underscores a transition from physical ritual to a new era of spiritual worship embodied in Jesus. Furthermore, the session explores the concept of a signs-based faith, contrasting it with a radical spiritual rebirth from above through water and the Spirit. Finally, the lecture contrasts the ministries of Jesus and John the Baptist, highlighting Jesus as the supreme agent of the Father who uniquely possesses and bestows the Holy Spirit without measure.

Outline

Introduction (John 2:12-13)

Transition from Cana in Galilee to Judea and Jerusalem
 Passing through Capernaum with family for a few days (v. 12)
 Journey up to Jerusalem for the Passover festival (v. 13)

I. The Temple Cleansing (John 2:13-22)

A. The Incident in the Temple Enclosure (vv. 13-17)

1. Commercial activities at Passover: Money changing and purchasing sacrificial animals (doves, sheep, cattle)
2. Jesus' physical intervention: Overturning tables, scattering coins, and driving out the merchants
3. Command: "Stop turning my Father's house into a market" (v. 16)
4. Disciple recollection: Old Testament citation of zeal for God's house (Psalm 69:9; Zechariah 14:21)

B. Challenge to Jesus' Authority (vv. 18-22)

1. Jewish leaders demand a miraculous sign to prove his authority to act
2. Jesus' enigmatic response: "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days" (v. 19)
3. Literal misunderstanding: The historical temple building had been under reconstruction/expansion by Herod for 46 years
4. Theological meaning: Jesus referred metaphorically to the temple of his body, understood by disciples only post-resurrection (vv. 21-22)

C. Chronology and Theological Explanations

1. Relationship to Synoptics: One cleansing vs. two cleansings (John places it early; Synoptics place it at the end of Jesus' ministry)
2. John's thematic structure: Highlights early, systemic conflict with the Jerusalem establishment that builds toward the crucifixion
3. Theological purpose: A prophetic sign pointing beyond moral reform to the transition of spiritual worship in spirit and truth rather than location

II. Transition: The Insufficiency of Signs-Based Faith (John 2:23-25)

- A. General signs performed during the Passover in Jerusalem (v. 23)
- B. Many see the signs and "believe in his name"
- C. Jesus' lack of trust (Greek *pisteuo* play on words): He does not entrust himself to them because he knows the human heart (vv. 24-25)
- D. Concept of signs-based faith as superficial, incomplete, or spiritually immature rather than mature, saving faith

III. The Night Dialogue with Nicodemus (John 3:1-21)

A. Characterization and Context (vv. 1-2)

1. Nicodemus: A Pharisee, ruler of the Jews, and Israel's prominent teacher
2. Coming by night: Metaphorical of spiritual darkness, caution, or secret curiosity

B. The Three Conversational Exchanges (vv. 2-15)

1. First Exchange (vv. 2-3):
 - a. Nicodemus' compliment: Acknowledging Jesus as a teacher from God due to signs
 - b. Jesus' direct reply: "No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again [from above]" (v. 3)
2. Second Exchange (vv. 4-8):
 - a. Nicodemus' literalist misunderstanding: Re-entering a mother's womb as an old man
 - b. Jesus' clarification: Rebirth of "water and the Spirit" (v. 5)
 - c. Clarification of flesh vs. Spirit (v. 6) and analogy of the wind blowing where it wills (v. 8)
 - d. Old Testament background: Association of water and Spirit in eschatological purification (Isaiah 44:3-5; Ezekiel 36:25-27)
3. Third Exchange (vv. 9-15):

- a. Nicodemus' exasperation: "How can this be?" (v. 9)
- b. Jesus' gentle rebuke: Israel's preeminent teacher failing to grasp covenantal renewal (v. 10)
- c. Earthly things vs. heavenly things and Jesus' pre-existent authority as the Son of Man (vv. 11-13)
- d. Typological allusion: Moses lifting the bronze serpent in the wilderness as a foreshadowing of the Son of Man being lifted up (vv. 14-15)

C. Theological Commentary on Nicodemus (vv. 16-21)

- 1. Narrative shift: Jesus' direct words transition into the Evangelist's editorial commentary
- 2. God's ultimate motivation: Sending his only Son out of love to save, not to condemn (vv. 16-17)
- 3. Realized eschatology: Faith in Christ as the present dividing line of judgment (v. 18)
- 4. Metaphorical wrap-up: Light vs. darkness; those who live by the truth come to the light (vv. 19-21)

IV. Concurrent Ministries of Jesus and John the Baptist (John 3:22-36)

A. Regional Ministry and Disciples' Dispute (vv. 22-30)

- 1. Concurrent baptisms in Judea and Enon near Salim (vv. 22-24)
- 2. Dispute between John's disciples and a certain Jew over ceremonial washing (v. 25)
- 3. Report that Jesus is drawing more people than John (v. 26)
- 4. John the Baptist's humility and joy: Comparison to the friend of the bridegroom (vv. 27-29)
- 5. John's submission: "He must become greater; I must become less" (v. 30)

B. Theological Commentary on John the Baptist's Testimony (vv. 31-36)

- 1. Narrative shift: Evangelist's editorial commentary on the supremacy of Christ
- 2. Jesus' superior origin: The one who comes from above is above all (v. 31)
- 3. The Spirit without limit: God provides the Spirit to Jesus without measure (v. 34)
- 4. Implicit Trinitarian theology: Father's love, Son's supreme agency, Holy Spirit's empowerment (vv. 40-41, 45)
- 5. The ultimate decision: Eternal life for whoever believes, abiding wrath for whoever rejects (v. 36)

V. Representative Character of Nicodemus

A. Progression of Faith Across the Gospel of John

- 1. John 3: Nighttime seeker who is curious but spiritually confused
- 2. John 7: Intellectual defender advocating for procedural justice before the Sanhedrin (vv. 50-52)
- 3. John 19: Courageous public disciple who, alongside Joseph of Arimathea, retrieves and buries Jesus' body (v. 39)

B. Challenge to the Audience: Moving from intellectual curiosity and secret faith to bold, spirit-led transformation