

NEW TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 14

John – Part Four

The Old Order and The New Order

John 2:12 - 4:42

I. BACKGROUND

It is useful in studying John to look at larger clumps of material and see themes set across multiple events in the life of Jesus. In that vein, we will cover John 2:12–4:42 with an eye toward certain themes consistent in the various events John described. Our goal is to not only to understand the events more fully, but also to try and better discern John’s purpose in choosing those events to relay to his readers in the manner he did.

At the core of this section is a comparison of the “old order” of Jewish religion, belief, and action compared to the new order coming with the Messiah.

II. JESUS CLEARS THE TEMPLE (John 2:12–2:25)

After the wedding events at Cana where Jesus turned water into wine, John sets out the account of Jesus clearing the Temple. Other gospel writers recorded this action by Jesus as well, although John gives us some additional information that emphasized this point better.

At the core of the story, we are told that it was almost time for the Jewish Passover when Jesus went “up” to Jerusalem. The “up” phrase with Jerusalem should never be confused with “up” in our directional sense of “north.” Jerusalem was on a hill, and hence, biblical writers always referenced going “up” to Jerusalem.

That Jesus went up at Passover is not without importance to the story. Passover was the festival that demarked the Jews from the Egyptians as God’s chosen people. It was the festival where the Passover lamb was slain for the sins of the people. It was the festival where the scapegoat took the sins of the people and was driven from the presence of God into the wilderness. It was the festival that God intended to be prophetic of the sacrifice that God would later provide through Jesus for God’s people, to lead the people from the bondage of slavery into the promised land of God’s kingdom.

So, against this backdrop of the Passover, Jesus goes into the Temple. This is the Temple where the sacrificial system finds its core activities as the people sacrifice through the priests to God. At the Temple are a number of sacrificial animals for sale for the people to buy for the sacrifices. There are also money-changers (think of airport currency exchange desks in foreign airports) for the people who come into Jerusalem from foreign lands to change currency and buy the animals for sacrifice.

Jesus makes a whip from cords and drives the moneychangers out of the temple. Matthew, Mark, and Luke also provide this account. John, however, adds a detail the others left out. Jesus not only drove the moneychangers out, but he also drove out the sacrificial animals themselves, “both sheep and cattle” (2:15).

Why did John tell us this? The temple itself was the center of Jewish worship and national hope. It was the core symbol of the Jewish religion. Against this backdrop, John repeatedly shows events in the life of Jesus that were forecasting the work Jesus would perfect in his passion and sacrifice.

So, Jesus drives out the animals for sacrifice in the temple because they were not necessary when Jesus himself was there. Jesus is showing that the old order is going and his new order is coming. In the new order, there was no reason for sacrificial animals. Jesus himself would drive them out replacing them with himself, the true Passover lamb.

Jesus is incensed at the way the sacrifices have turned from a foreshadowing of God’s redemptive work into a market driven profit center for so many.

The Jews question Jesus’ authority to do such a deed and demand from him a miraculous sign to substantiate such drastic deeds. Jesus responds that the miraculous sign they seek will come from their own unbelief. Jesus tells them to “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.” The people do not understand that Jesus is referring to the real “temple” where God really dwells and communes with man, namely in Jesus Christ, the word made flesh. The people believe Jesus is talking about the physical temple where the symbolic sacrifices of actual animals were taking place.

Of course, had the people understood Jesus saw himself as the real temple, they would have realized that there was no need for sacrificial cattle and sheep. These people, however, had no such understanding. It is ironic that their desire for a sign stemming from their own disbelief would ultimately bring about the very sign they sought. In other words, their disbelief would result in the death of Jesus, the destruction of the temple. The following resurrection would be their miracle.

This story John writes from the life of Jesus contrasts the old Jewish sacrificial system with that of the new messianic sacrifice that was once and for all. It especially highlights this change when we consider that John wrote this gospel after the destruction of even the Jerusalem temple in 70 A.D. At the time of John's writings, the Jewish sacrifices themselves had ceased because of the absence of the temple. Yet, the finished work of Christ was a sacrifice once and for all. The temple of his body underwent a resurrection after three days and lives for eternity. Not only that, but the church becomes the body of Christ and is the dwelling place of God with man until Jesus returns.

The cattle, the sheep, the moneychangers, and the old system become footnotes of history while the true life of Christ and his church live eternally.

III. JESUS AND NICODEMUS (John 3:1-22)

While Edward covered the account of Jesus and Nicodemus last week, we will look at it in the context of John's points of comparing the old system and the new system.

Nicodemus represents the old system in all its glory. He is a Jew of Jews, part of the ruling council, a Pharisee. Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. We remember here that John uses light and darkness as symbols of life in Christ and feeling lost over and over in his writings. There is no mistaking that as Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night, we see the old system in the dark seeking answers from the Messiah, Jesus, the light of the world. (Later in John, we will see an interesting contrast as Judas departs from the light of Christ and betrays Jesus in the dark of night.)

Nicodemus questions Jesus as a worker from God. Jesus then explains that Nicodemus needs to be born again to understand and see the kingdom of God for what it is. Nicodemus does not understand this point. Nicodemus takes Jesus literally and quizzes how one might reenter the womb and be born again. Jesus tries explaining that the rebirth is a spiritual one.

Jesus is not surprised that Nicodemus does not understand the ways of God in this regard, even though Nicodemus is a teacher of Israel. Jesus is bringing about a new covenant that does not make sense to the old guard who missed Jesus' presence in the meanings of the old covenant. Instead of seeing Jesus, the old covenant had become a cold stone standard of action and behavior that lost all meaning beyond its own existence.

We should pause at the Nicodemus story to see that the NIV has made a decision for us on what exactly Jesus said to Nicodemus. Scholars do not know or readily agree whether Jesus' explanation to Nicodemus ended with John 3:15 or John 3:21. The Greek, as we have mentioned before, does not have quotation marks or punctuation that detail for us where Jesus started and where he stopped. The NIV and other Bibles add those quotation marks and some "red letter editions" put the words that are those of Jesus in red letters. Again though, like the quotation marks, those red letters are sometimes conjecture on where Jesus' words start and stop.

John, either by quoting Jesus or by explaining the story, does add the significant contrast of the light of the new covenant/system as compared to the darkness of Nicodemus and the old covenant/system. In 3:19ff we read:

Light has come in to the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light...

In this way, the contrast between the cold legalistic rituals that had no meaning under the religious system of the day is seen as evil compared to the wholesome refreshing light of the word made flesh and laid out for mankind. The Christian faith is not a hidden secret. It is the very visible obvious answer for God's relationship with mankind.

IV. JOHN THE BAPTIST REVISITED (John 3:22–3:36)

Following this encounter, John recounts for us Jesus and his disciples going into the Judean countryside. There we see Jesus and his followers baptizing (at least Jesus' followers were baptizing) while John the Baptist was also baptizing nearby. The followers of John were a bit upset that John's following was leaving and heading over to Jesus.

John's response points again to the coming covenant in Jesus. John explains that in the Messiah is true life – something far beyond John's baptism for repentance. John sees the work of Jesus as the future from God, increasing into its fullness. John and the old order are decreasing once their function of pointing to Jesus is done.

V. JESUS AND THE SAMARITAN WOMAN (John 4:1-42)

If we see in Nicodemus the “old Orthodoxy” contrasted with the new orthodoxy in Jesus, then in John the Baptist, we see the “old renegade/non-conformist yet pure of heart” who still shrinks in the future and pales in comparison to the glory of the Messiah and the coming “purity of heart.”

Now, the scene shifts to a Samaritan woman. She represents an aberrant religion, the old system of heresy that does not even match up to the law as Moses laid down. Even still, we see a contrast Jesus brings between her old religion and the coming kingdom.

The scene itself has echoes of the way John will write on the passion in John 19 and following. We will note some of those parallels as we go through the story.

Jesus comes to a well where a Samaritan woman is drawing water. John notes (verse 6) that it was the sixth hour (noon). This is the same time signature that John sets out in the passion narrative at John 19:14 when Pilate hands over Jesus to be crucified.

Certainly noon, the heat of the day, was a suitable time for one to be thirsty in the first century Middle East. We should remember that the folks then could not easily access drinking water the way we do in 21st century America. Water was a matter of life and death. Good clean water was a treasure.

Jesus comes to this well and asks a Samaritan woman to draw him a drink. The woman is stunned. First, Jewish men generally had no regard for women and did not speak to them publicly. Moreover, as a Samaritan, the woman would have been considered unclean and a heretic, who was sinful to even talk to.

John adds here that Jesus is alone. His disciples have gone into town to buy some food. As in the passion narrative John lays out later, we see Jesus alone, weary, hungry and thirsty.

That Jesus is talking to the Samaritan woman is not lost on her. She questions Jesus, asking why he is speaking to her, a Samaritan and a woman. Jesus answers that if she had a clue who he was then she would be speaking to him asking him for water.

The woman wonders how Jesus would go about getting her or him any water since Jesus is without a scoop of any kind. Jesus explains that he has water that fully and totally eliminates thirst forever. Now that, the woman says, is water she would like! It would definitely save her hauling time each day!

Jesus tells the woman to go get her husband. The woman replies she has none, and Jesus, knowing more than she dreamed possible, explains her unusual status vis-à-vis marriage.

The woman deftly changes the subject from her tattered home life to matters of a more “religious” nature. She comments that Jesus is obviously a prophet, and then asks where folks should be worshiping, the Jewish site of Jerusalem or the Samaritan site of Mt. Gerizim. Jesus explains that the old order is leaving and a new order is coming. The new order is neither the Jewish Jerusalem or the Samaritan Gerizim. The new system will be worship in spirit and truth, not location.

The woman notes that the Messiah is set to explain and teach such things. To this comment, Jesus answered that he is in fact the Messiah.

As the disciples join Jesus, they are surprised that Jesus is engaged in conversation with this Samaritan woman. As she leaves to bring people to see Jesus, the disciples urge Jesus to eat lunch. Jesus explains that he is more concerned about getting God’s work done in the lives of people than in eating their food. Jesus uses the same verb form that will be echoed later from the cross when Jesus says he is to “finish” the work of him who sent him (4:34).

Many Samaritans came to faith in Jesus through the ministry of this sin-laden, stained life woman Jesus befriended at the well. Jesus then stayed two days with the Samaritans.

As John unfolds these multiple stories to compare the old with the new, we see interesting comparisons. First, the old Jewish orthodoxy stayed in the dark, while one of its numbers began to probe Jesus in the light. However, most went about resetting their tables and reselling their sacrifices in a system destined for destruction. The renegade yet pure-in-heart John the Baptist, saw the old changing and leaving while the new was coming and growing. The sinful heretic castaway Samaritans were confronted with the change and embraced it.

VI. POINTS FOR HOME

1. A stale religion is dead religion.
2. Jesus is fresh and alive.
3. A life in Jesus is a life in the light.
4. The worst sinners and heretics are welcome in the changes Jesus brings.
5. The religious need to be careful; they often have no room for Jesus.