

## THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN - PART V

### THE CLEANSING OF THE TEMPLE, THE INQUIRY OF NICODEMUS,

### AND THE FAREWELL OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

I. After describing the beginning of a new creation, culminating in the wedding of Cana, the Gospel then plunges into the conflict between Jesus and the forces of the world in Jerusalem.

A. Verse 12 poignantly indicates a last time of peace in Capernaum before the public ministry of Jesus, which will lead to His death, begins. Noteworthy, Jesus does not go to Capernaum, when invited to do so by the centurion, and instead performs the miraculous cure at a distance; and the next time He is at Capernaum, for the Bread of Life discourse, many people refuse to believe Him. Jesus' departure from Capernaum means leaving His more peaceful life to take on the world.

B. If the wedding feast of Cana represents a certain reestablishment of the cooperation in Eden, the cleansing of the Temple parallels the expulsion. According to the Synoptic Gospels, this event occurred during the week leading up to the Crucifixion. Arranging his Gospel more thematically than chronologically, John describes it here, where it establishes the themes of the opposition of worldly forces to Jesus, and of Jesus cleansing and fulfilling Jewish worship. See Mal. 3:1-4. The Synoptic Gospels focus heavily on Jesus' ministry in Galilee, and then describe the scenes in Jerusalem during Holy Week. John, however, focuses heavily on Jerusalem in order to show how Jesus fulfills the worship and feasts of the Jews, which centered on Jerusalem.

C. Inside the temple, merchants would sell animals deemed worthy of sacrifice. Any animals bought outside might well be rejected by the priests as having blemishes and thus unfitted for sacrifice. See Lev. 22:19-25. Duet. 17:1; Mal. 1:8, 13. As a result, the animals were sold at a much higher price inside the Temple. In addition, they could only be bought with the official Temple currency, not with pagan currency, and so money changers also made a good profit there. During the Passover, the outer court of the Temple, which was meant to bring all nations, even non-Jews, to worship God, see Is. 56:6-7, was transformed into a busy, and sometimes dishonest marketplace.

D. Jesus dramatically drives out the merchants and money changers, representing the expulsion of evil from the sacred place, referring to the prophesy of Zechariah of a day when the Lord would rescue Jerusalem from invaders and establish a new permanent reign in which all nations would come to worship God. See Zech 14:21. His disciples, still thinking of Jesus more as a

great leader, but not necessarily as God Himself, recall Psalm 69, in which the Psalmist prays for help against foes, and ends by expressing confidence in delivery from the Lord. See Ps. 69:10. Verse 22 also foreshadows Jesus' death, see John 19:28-29.

E. Picking up on the theme of signs, the people in Jerusalem demand a sign for this action. The commercialization of the Temple was often criticized, and Jesus' opponents do not directly criticize the action of taking on the merchants, but rather question His authority for doing so. Jesus gives them a sign, but not one that will be fulfilled immediately, i.e. the sign of His resurrection as the raising up of a new Temple. See Ex. 3:11-12. This promise reflects the fact that the Temple was an image of a heavenly Temple that Jesus is now bringing to earth. See Ex. 25:40, Heb. 8:5. The glory of God came upon the tabernacle in the Temple on earth, but the Israelites could only approach it, not be in God's presence. But now Jesus was bringing the glory of God to be present to each of the faithful through His body.

F. The Temple had been destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C., but had been rebuilt by the Jews who returned from exile, beginning in 520 B.C. Herod the Great, king of Palestine from 37-4 B.C., launched a massive construction project to restore the Temple to her former glory and, at least externally, make her greater than every before. The people in Jerusalem believe He is referring only to the reconstruction of this Temple on earth, imagining that there could be nothing higher.

G. The passage ends with a passing reference to many other signs Jesus performed in Jerusalem, which lead many to believe in "His name," but not really to come to conversion. The idea is that they believed in Him because of shows of power, but were not really ready to trust Him on any other basis. John, emphasizing Jesus' control over and knowledge of the world, clarifies that Jesus was not deceived by insincere belief, based upon mere shows of power. After the multiplication of loaves, Jesus would specifically refuse to be crowned a king based upon that show of power. See John 6:15.

II. Nicodemus, a mixed figure who has a certain desire to believe, but a lack of courage as well, then comes to Jesus, and Jesus describes the idea of a birth from above through water and the Spirit.

A. This passage begins with Nicodemus coming at night, probably reflecting his concern that other leaders in Jerusalem might think him a disciple of Jesus. Nicodemus' other appearances in the Gospel portray him as a good person, trying to defend Jesus and then burying His body, but not willing to take the risks involved in a total commitment. See John 17:50-52. 29:39. But the night also represents the darkness of the intellect that only the grace from above can cure, as Jesus will soon explain.

B. In response to Nicodemus' praise of Jesus as a "teacher from God," Jesus says that to see the kingdom of God, one must be born from above, that is "born of water and the Spirit." This passage seems to be a reference to baptism, as is indicated both by John the Baptist's introduction to Jesus in terms of baptism in the Spirit, and the fact that this passage is followed by an episode centering on disputes about baptism.

C. Jesus then uses a play on words to speak of the mysterious workings of the Spirit in terms of a wind whose origin and goal is not seen, but whose effects are felt. In Hebrew, the same term ruah, mean both water and spirit, and the Greek term pneuma means the same.

D. Jesus first indicates that Nicodemus, and by extension the other rulers of the Jews, should have understood this idea of being born again in the Spirit. Jesus may well have meant that, because the prophets had spoken of an era in which the spirit would be poured forth after a time of purification, Nicodemus and the others leaders should understand Jesus' words. See Ez. 36:25-27; Zech. 13:1.

E. At first Jesus says "we" speak of what "we" have seen. He seems to be identifying Himself with the prophetic tradition, in which the prophets often spoke in terms of visions they had seen. However, He then distinguishes Himself from the prophets by saying that the Son of Man alone has gone up to heaven, and He has now descended to earth. The Son of Man in this case apparently picks up on the image from Daniel that one "like a son of Man" would come to judge the nations. See Daniel 7.

F. Jesus then builds on the Son of Man imagery by saying that the Son of Man will be "lifted up" like the serpent that Moses lifted up in the desert to save the people from the plague of serpents. During their journey to the Promised Land, the people complained about this "wretched food" that they had to eat, which was presumably the manna. As a result, God sent poisonous serpents. After they repented, God told Moses to fashion a bronze serpent and lift it up. Whoever looked upon it would live. See Num. 21:4-9. Part of the idea is that the image of evil was "lifted up" to save people from the actual evil that resulted from their sins. That bronze serpent was itself a sign of Christ who would take on the effects of evil as He was lifted up on the Cross to save the world from sin, which involves above all rejecting the Son of Man whom God gives us, and who (as chapter 6 will indicate) takes on the appearance of bread to be food for the world. And that chapter will indicate that it is the bread that gives eternal life.

- Paralleling the three prophecies of Jesus regarding His death and resurrection as the Son of Man in the Gospel according

to Mark, the Gospel according to John also records three of Jesus' statements of judgment surrounding acceptance or rejection of the Son of Man. The other two come at the end of the Bread of Life Discourse and in Jesus' comment on the cure of the blind man. See John 6:62, 35-36.

G. The passage then ends with a discourse indicating that the Son came into the world, showing God's love for the world. It is here, after the description of the "lifting up" of the Son of Man, i.e. crucifixion, that the Gospel introduces the idea of God's perfect love (agape) for us, which is at the essence of His nature and continues despite our lack of merit. See 1 John 4:7-12. Again, it states Jesus' mission positively. However, it indicates that a refusal to believe indicates the lack of faith that leads to condemnation.

- It then describes the acceptance and refusal to believe in terms of whether someone wants to be in the light, or prefers darkness to conceal deeds of darkness.
- The passage clearly presents faith and good works as tied together. On the one hand, it presents faith (belief in the Son of God) as the basis for eternal life. However, it also indicates that, if one's deeds are good, one will want that faith, whereas evil deeds will lead one to reject it.
- The contrast is particularly fitting here, where Nicodemus is challenged to accept Jesus, and is in between the merchants in the temple, who reject Him, and John the Baptist, who points the way to acceptance.

III. The scene then switches back to the desert and John the Baptist, who concludes the beginning portion of the Book of Signs and points the way to the next section, which will focus on the imagery of water. The scene is at Aenon, near Salim. Aenon is derived from the Hebrew word for "fountain" and Salim from the Hebrew word for "peace."

A. It is not clear who "the certain Jew" was whose disciples were disputing with John. It could have been Jesus, but the Gospel refers to Jesus more clearly elsewhere. It could have been one of the Essenes, who also used baptism, but who did not welcome outsiders. It could have simply been one of the many people who were beginning to use baptism as a symbol at that time.

B. Whoever it was, the disciples seem to believe that Jesus' newfound popularity would be a threat to John. The disciples refer to John as "Rabbi," possibly because he has rejected the other proposed titles in chapter 1. The title is the same as the one Nicodemus used for Jesus, which indicates that the people are still thinking of the two as being at the same level.

C. John then rejects the proposed rivalry and refers back to the joyous wedding imagery from the feast of Cana, introducing Jesus now as "the bridegroom." This imagery picks up on Old Testament imagery of Israel as the bride of God. See, e.g., Is. 54:5-6, 62:1-5; Ez. 16:6-63; Hos 2:1-22; see also the Song of Songs generally. The letter to the Ephesians and the Book of Revelations will especially use this imagery to present more clearly the Church as the Bride of Christ. See Eph. 5:21-32; Rev. 19:6-9, 21:2, 9-10; see also 2 Cor. 11:2.

- Reflecting perfect humility John sees his task as nearly complete and perceives the fulfillment of his hopes. Later, Jesus will speak at the Last Supper of being the joyfulness of His presence into the world. See John 15:11, 17:13; see also 1 John 1:4.

D. The passage then ends with a commentary on the fact that only one from heaven can reveal heavenly things. (There does, however, seem to be an implication that even John saw some things of heaven and was able to reveal them.) The passage then comes back to the idea of eternal life coming from believing in Christ, but also introduces the idea of the Spirit being poured forth upon those who accept Christ. In the Last Supper, Jesus will take up this theme and promise the outpouring of the Spirit upon His disciples. John 14:25-26, 15:26-27, 16:12-15. The crucifixion will be presented in terms of "handing over the spirit," meaning both giving up life and pouring forth the Holy Spirit. John 19:30. And, after the resurrection, Jesus will expressly confer the Spirit upon His disciples, especially associating the Spirit with the ability to confer forgiveness of sins. John 20:22-23.