

# CHAPTER THREE

## THE TRUE TEMPLE

*“Why should men love the church? Why should they love her laws?...  
They constantly try to escape from the darkness outside and within,  
by dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need to be good.”*

*-T.S. Eliot, “Choruses from the Rock”*

If you grew up in church, you might have no time imagining Jesus as a Savior calling sinners to repentance. You might even imagine him as especially at work in the “hard cases,” those who emerge from the darkness of “sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll” into the light of newfound religion. It’s a lot harder to imagine Jesus as a Savior calling us to repent of our religion. But the boundary lines between light and darkness don’t stop at the church door. As we turn the pages of John’s biography of Jesus, we find a curious conversation between Jesus and one of Israel’s most seasoned religious scholars:

“Now a certain man, a Pharisee named Nicodemus, who was a member of the Jewish ruling council, came to Jesus at night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs that you do unless God is with him.” (John 3:1-2)

Right away, we learn several important details about Nicodemus. First, he’s a Pharisee, a designation that carried considerable religious and cultural implications in Jesus’ day. The ancient historian Josephus referred to this group as “experts in the law in their own country.”<sup>1</sup> They were the religious fundamentalists of the first-century world, though their adherence to the law was so famously strict that they did more to alienate than to persuade. Not only was Nicodemus a Pharisee, but a “member of the Jewish ruling council.” Such a prominent position suggests that he comes to Jesus as an old man, widely revered for his religious pedigree.

Today, the word “Pharisee” has become something of a cultural stereotype. We might think of Pharisees as the Sunday church crowd, thumping their King James Bibles and clutching their pearls over the volume of today’s rock music. No one thinks of Pharisees as something that they can turn into. But haven’t you ever found yourself looking down at those who don’t share your upstanding moral record? Do you struggle to get along with those who don’t share your views on every point of theology? Or what about this: do you question the quality of your neighbor’s faith once you find out that they voted for the “other” political candidate? Congratulations; you’re a Pharisee.

The problem with this kind of thinking is that it can never fully satisfy you. You’ll be left hopping from church to church hunting for the next spiritual “high” of a new worship experience, or to immerse yourself in yet another religious project. All the while you’ll be met head-on by the painful reality that as much as you might be doing *for* God, you’re not getting what you wanted *from* God. You

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<sup>1</sup> Josephus, *Bellum Iudaicum*, 1.648.

kept all the rules — so why hasn't he blessed you? Why are you still scraping the bottom of your bank account? And why didn't your kids turn out the way you hoped?

Nicodemus comes to Jesus with questions of his own. His phrasing is almost confrontational, were it not blunted by the fact that he comes to Jesus at night. Was John using darkness to reflect his doubt and disbelief? Or perhaps the reason was more practical: Darkness would conceal his actions from those who might confuse curiosity with allegiance. Or, maybe something was keeping this old man awake at night. What had happened to prompt this journey? To answer that question, we first have to understand what had happened at the most recent Passover.

## THE TRUE TEMPLE

Passover was easily the biggest holiday for the Jewish people, the day that they would celebrate deliverance from Egypt. Thousands of devout Jews would descend upon the city of Jerusalem to make sacrifices in the temple. Because of the length of the journey, the temple would provide sacrificial animals for purchase. Jesus would have visited the temple many times in years past, as would his disciples. This year was different. This year, Jesus arrives with all the meekness of a hurricane wind.

“He found in the temple courts those who were selling oxen and sheep and doves, and the money changers sitting at tables. So he made a whip of cords and drove them all out of the temple courts, with the sheep and the oxen. He scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. To those who sold the doves he said, “Take these things away from here! Do not make my Father's house a marketplace!” His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will devour me.” (John 2:14-16)

Why such violence? We might suppose that Jesus is reacting to some injustice within the temple system — such as price gouging or selling inferior merchandise. This misses the point altogether. Centuries before Jesus' arrival, Zechariah had predicted that when the Messiah arrives, “there shall be no longer be a Canaanite in the house of the Lord” (Zechariah 14:21). In Hebrew, the word “Canaanite” has another meaning: *trader*. When the Messiah arrives, there will be no more salesmen in the house of the Lord. So, if Jesus is chasing the tradesmen and merchants from the temple courts, he's making a powerful, authoritative statement: *The Messiah is here*.

In other words, Jesus isn't simply rejecting the abuses of the temple system. He's rejecting the system entirely. As Jacob Neusner explains, “Jesus' overturning of the moneychangers' tables represents an act of rejection of the most important rite of the Israelite cult, the daily whole-offering, and therefore, a statement that there is a means of atonement rather than the whole offering, which is now null.” After all, if Jesus is the “lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,” what place is there for the temple sacrifice?

Amid the clatter of tables and coins, Jesus' message was heard loud and clear by the religious establishment. They ask:

"What sign can you show us, since you are doing these things?" Jesus replied, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up again." Then the Jewish leaders said to him, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and are you going to raise it up in three

days?" But Jesus was speaking about the temple of his body. So after he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the scripture and the saying that Jesus had spoken." (John 2:18-21)

To understand what's happening here, you first need to understand something about the nature of the temple itself. No structure was more important in the minds of first-century Jews. As N.T. Wright explains, "the Temple...was...the place where heaven and earth met. It was the place where God lived. Or, more precisely, the place on earth where God's presence intersected with human, this-worldly reality."<sup>2</sup> Israel's history was full of stories of how God's glory dwelled the innermost portions of the Jerusalem temple.

At the time, the temple was undergoing a major reconstruction under the direction of King Herod. While Rome's involvement generated ambivalence, Jesus' talk of the temple's destruction would have been unthinkable. What no one understood at the time was that Jesus was referring to his own death and resurrection. The temple — the true Temple — was Jesus' own flesh and blood. God's presence would be localized in the "body of Christ," not a mere building. Later, Jesus tells the disciples that "in my Father's house are many rooms," and that through his death he will "prepare a place for you" (John 14:2). Jesus may be speaking of the afterlife, but the phrase "Father's house" instantly recalls this scene. Jesus seems to be saying that by offering himself as sacrifice, he becomes the means by which God's people find forgiveness and connection. Again, this was unthinkable. As Wright explains: "Jesus seems to be claiming that God is doing, up close and personal through him, something that you'd normally expect to happen at the Temple."<sup>3</sup> What's more, John tells us that "when [Jesus] was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing" (John 2:23). Rather than seeing continuity between Jesus' message and Israel's history, the religious leaders see only conflict. A storm has begun to brew.

## BORN AGAIN

Do you see now how this might provoke the mind of a religious leader like Nicodemus? Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem had been less an act of worship than an act of arson. Yet Nicodemus had yet to sift the gospel's true brilliance from the ashes of tradition. When he comes to Jesus, he expects a debate like any other Rabbi. Jesus' response leaves him flat.

Jesus replied, "I tell you the solemn truth, unless a person is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter his mother's womb and be born a second time, can he?" (John 3:3-4)

Here, the phrase "born from above" can also be translated as "born again." Jesus is saying that the only way to experience God's kingdom is total transformation. Nicodemus doesn't get it, which is half the point. You can't white-knuckle your way into salvation any more easily than an old man can re-experience childbirth. "Nothing can save us that is possible,"<sup>4</sup> said the poet W.H. Auden. And by

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<sup>2</sup> N.T. Wright, *Simply Jesus: A New Vision of Who He Was, What He Did, and Why He Matters*. (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 132

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>4</sup> W.H. Auden, from the Advent section of *For the Time Being*.

every human standard, salvation is an absolute impossibility. It can only be accomplished by the work of God.

Jesus answered, "I tell you the solemn truth, unless a person is born of water and spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must all be born from above.' The wind blows wherever it will, and you hear the sound it makes, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." (John 3:5-8)

If rebirth were ever possible, it would only be through the supernatural work of the Spirit. Nicodemus would instantly recognize “water” and “wind” as symbols of the Messianic age (Isaiah 32:15; Ezekiel 36:25-26). Jesus goes further by explaining that the Spirit works with all the wildness of the wind — unpredictable, yet transformational. Nicodemus had been well-regarded as a master of religious teaching. But Jesus is almost telling him: *You've been thinking about this all wrong. Religion isn't something you can master. True religion is something that masters you.*

Nicodemus replied, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you don't understand these things? I tell you the solemn truth, we speak about what we know and testify about what we have seen, but you people do not accept our testimony. If I have told you people about earthly things and you don't believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven — the Son of Man. (John 3:9-13)

The greatest tragedy isn't that you and I might live a life of mindless self-indulgence. It's that we accumulate a lifetime of religious knowledge, a lifetime of church experiences — and miss Jesus altogether.

John Wesley is best known as the founder of the Methodist movement. But his diary reveals a man struggling to internalize the gospel. While in Savannah, Wesley sought advice for his future career as pastor and missionary. He records a conversation that nearly echoes that of Jesus and Nicodemus:

“[My mentor] said, ‘My brother... Does the Spirit of God bear witness with your spirit, that you are a child of God?’ I was surprised, and knew not what to answer. He observed it, and asked, ‘Do you know Jesus Christ?’ I paused, and said, ‘I know He is the Savior of the world.’ ‘True,’ replied he, ‘but do you know he has saved you?’ I answered, ‘I hope he has died to save me.’ He only added, ‘Do you know yourself?’ I said, ‘I do.’...But I fear they were vain words.”<sup>5</sup>

Wesley would struggle for years with his congregation, often growing frustrated that they were not growing in holiness. It wasn't until that Wesley discovered the Martin Luther's writings on the book of Romans that his eyes were fully opened. He would later reflect on his life prior to conversion:

“In this refined way of trusting to my own works, and my own righteousness...I dragged on heavily, finding no comfort or heal therein till the time of my leaving England. On shipboard,

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<sup>5</sup> John Wesley, quoted in Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, Vol. 2. (New York: HarperOne, 1985), 209-212

however, I was again active in outward works....And I continued preaching and following after and trusting in that righteousness whereby no flesh can be justified.”<sup>6</sup>

Sometimes, Jesus calls his people out of a life of self-indulgence. And sometimes, Jesus calls his people out of a life of self-righteousness. The gospel is a call to relinquish our grip on our own moral record, and to trust instead in a God whose Spirit makes new life out of absolute impossibilities.

## BEHOLD AND BELIEVE

Jesus understands that Nicodemus doesn't need another sermon or debate. Instead, he reminds him of one of Israel's most beloved stories:

“Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.” (John 3:14-15)

After being liberated from Egypt, the people of Israel spent years wandering in the desert. Among their hardships was a plague of venomous snakes. To deepen the nation's trust, God instructed Moses to craft a serpent out of bronze, and attach it to his staff. If you were bitten, you had only to look at this bronze serpent to be cured. Jesus is saying that sin works the same way. There is something dark and venomous inside every human heart — something good behavior alone can never cure. On the contrary; trying to cover our sin with a religious exterior is like putting a bandage on a snakebite. We might treat the exterior wound, but the poison will still kill us. Our only hope, Jesus says, is for himself to “be lifted up,” a symbolic reference to his future death and resurrection. On the cross, Jesus absorbs the “venom” of our sinfulness, and in its place new life flows into our veins.

Such language may seem out-of-place within the sanitized walls of today's sanctuaries. But for Jesus, the message is fundamental. At this point, Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus seems to have ended, but John offers an extended commentary:

For this is the way God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world should be saved through him. The one who believes in him is not condemned. The one who does not believe has been condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the one and only Son of God. (John 3:16-18)

According to John, *beholding* and *believing* come before *behaving*. It's not that God is disinterested in a changed lifestyle. And it's certainly not the case that the gospel doesn't promote spiritual growth. But the more we attempt to secure our own righteousness through religious works, the more we do violence to Jesus' fundamental message. Martin Luther made this same point, explaining that “to trust in works...is equivalent to giving oneself the honor and taking it from God.” Good behavior becomes an idol, an excuse to brag on our own moral record rather than depend on the righteousness that only comes through Jesus.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

In Oscar Wilde's classic novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the title character commissions a portrait of himself. By some trick of magic, the portrait would somehow absorb Dorian's sins. The more Dorian goes out womanizing and pursue his own desires, the uglier the painting would become, while Dorian remained a healthy young man. To conceal this fact, Dorian locks the painting in the attic, where his portrait grows all the more twisted as the years go by.

Finally, Dorian can no longer take it. His conscience is too riddled with guilt, his sins now having escalated to murder. So, he commits himself to change his way. He'd treat the woman he's currently seeing with kindness, with decency. Surely this would start to reverse the horrible image that's lurking in his attic.

"A new life! That was what he wanted... Surely he had begun it already... he began to wonder if the portrait in the locked room had changed. Surely it was not still so horrible as it had been? Perhaps if his life became pure, he would be able to expel every sign of evil passion from the face... He would go and look...."

He went in quietly, locking the door behind him, as was his custom, and dragged the purple hanging from the portrait. A cry of pain and indignation broke from him. He could see no change, save that in the eyes there was a look of cunning and in the mouth the curved wrinkle of the hypocrite. The thing was still loathsome—more loathsome, if possible, than before—and the scarlet dew that spotted the hand seemed brighter, and more like blood newly spilled.<sup>7</sup>

Dorian is shocked. His evil ways had done considerable damage. Why couldn't his goodness reverse the damage? He could only conclude that his "one good deed" had been mere "hypocrisy." "Through vanity he had spared her," the author tells us. "In hypocrisy he had worn the mask of goodness. For curiosity's sake he had tried the denial of self." In the same way, the more we use religion to make ourselves presentable to God or others, the more we deepen the wound.

The problem, of course, is that religion offers a safe place to hide. John explains further:

Now this is the basis for judging: that the light has come into the world and people loved the darkness rather than the light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil deeds hates the light and does not come to the light, so that their deeds will not be exposed. But the one who practices the truth comes to the light, so that it may be plainly evident that his deeds have been done in God. (John 3:19-21)

Do you fear exposure? Vulnerability? Then religion offers a convenient mask. You can earn the respect of your fellow churchgoers. You can be a pillar in your community. And no one will ever know about the secrets that lie beneath the surface: your browser history, or the things you've said to your children. Jesus is the greatest friend of the maskless. He invites us to behold and believe, that our lives might be changed from inside out. Only then can our deeds be plainly seen as sourced in the righteousness of Christ — and not our own.

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<sup>7</sup> Oscar Wilde, *A Portrait of Dorian Gray*. (New York: Random House, 1926), 245-47.

## IT IS FINISHED

When Jesus is finally “lifted up” on the cross, his final words are “It is finished.” That’s powerfully good news for those who live on the unending treadmill of their own good works. The essence of the gospel is not: “Do more,” but “it’s done.”

Growing up, Jared Wilson had been thoroughly disciplined by the American megachurch movement. He’d sat under countless hours of teaching on how to improve your marriage, finances, etc. Later he reflects: “When my life fell apart, I had a notebook full of years of sermon notes on how to be a better \*whatever\*. Like being in the Sahara with a canteen full of sand.”<sup>8</sup> Some of you are exhausted from trying to “be a better Christian.” Some of you are exhausted from searching for the next religious project. Jesus’ words come to you as a refreshing stream in the desert: “It’s done.”

Did Nicodemus understand this? While he would make a later appearance at another religious festival (John 7:50-52), our deepest clue comes in the aftermath of Jesus’ death:

After this, Joseph of Arimathea, a disciple of Jesus (but secretly, because he feared the Jewish leaders), asked Pilate if he could remove the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission, so he went and took the body away. Nicodemus, the man who had previously come to Jesus at night, accompanied Joseph, carrying a mixture of myrrh and aloes weighing about seventy-five pounds. Then they took Jesus’ body and wrapped it, with the aromatic spices, in strips of linen cloth according to Jewish burial customs. (John 19:38-40)

Nicodemus came from a culture dominated by laws of purity and defilement. To touch a dead body on the eve of Passover would have been unthinkable for a man in his position — unless he saw something different. Could it be that after a lifetime of religious striving, Nicodemus had finally come to behold and believe in the Savior, lifted up to provide life to the world? Could it be that now, after a lifetime of religious duty, that Nicodemus felt salvation running red through his fingers? To any religious Jew, Jesus’ blood would have been a symbol of defilement. But for Nicodemus, Jesus’ blood is the only thing that makes us clean. What can take away my sin? What can make me whole again? Nothing...nothing but the blood of Jesus. Nothing more. Nothing less. And nothing else.

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<sup>8</sup> Jared C. Wilson (@jaredcwilson), “When my life fell apart, I had a notebook full of years of sermon notes on how to be a better \*whatever\*. Like being in the Sahara with a canteen full of sand,” Twitter, Oct 10, 2019, 9:54 AM.