

John 2

13 When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

14 In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money.

15 So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables.

16 To those who sold doves he said, "Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a market!"

17 His disciples remembered that it is written: "Zeal for your house will consume me."

Matthew 21

12 Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves.

13 "It is written," he said to them, "'My house will be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it 'a den of robbers.'"

14 The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them.

Strange and Beautiful

Doug Brendel

I'm old now, but I was young then.
I'm poor now, but I was well off back then.
I wouldn't say rich, but well off, yes.

Let me explain.

There's an old song, King David wrote it, it's like a prayer to God.

My mother used to sing it around the house.

And there's this one line that sort of stuck in my head when I was a little boy.

Zeal for your house will consume me.

This was the line of the song that I always found myself humming, or singing in my head.

“Zeal for your house will consume me!” It was like being crazy for the temple. The house of God.
 Feeling so strongly about it.
 Wanting to please God.
 Wanting to do everything right, you know what I mean?
 Go to temple, do the sacrifices, be a part of the traditions that our people had been doing for all these thousands of years.

This is how I grew up.
 Zeal for God’s house. The place where God was.

The great question of life was, How do you make God happy?
 Well, that was very clear.
 It was all mapped out.
 You could read it, you could memorize it, you could do it. I’m talking about our religious laws. The Torah.
 For example: you witness an accident, you don’t report it — or — you touch the carcass of an unclean animal — or — you sin but don’t realize it, then you learn about it later — if you’re guilty in any of these ways, you confess the truth, and you pay.
 You bring a lamb or a goat. If you can’t afford a lamb, you can bring two doves or pigeons.
 You can read all of this in the Torah; it’s all there.
 And if you had any questions, our leaders would answer the questions.
 So you were secure.

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My family, we were in livestock.
 We had lambs *and* goats, thank God.
 But we sold doves and pigeons too.
 My father said if you couldn’t afford a lamb or a goat, we still wanted to be able to help you.
 Help you love God, help you *show* your love for God, help you make God happy.

My father began because of the wool, obviously.
 This was the big money.
 There wasn’t big money in temple sacrifices, in the old days.
 Not enough people in Jerusalem doing the sacrifices, not enough pressure on people, I guess I would say, to do what God wanted them to do.

But the Pharisees stepped up on this. They started whipping people into shape.

When I was a kid, you hardly ever saw a Pharisee on the street.

But by the time we started selling in the temple, you would see Pharisees stopping people on the street all the time — something wrong with their clothing, some violation of the Law.

They were cleaning Israel up, let me tell you.

This was a good thing.

Zeal for God's house!

This was why we were there, at the temple.

Do you understand what I'm saying?

My father was a good son of Israel.

He had a successful livestock business.

He would go to the temple.

He would worship and make sacrifices and — of course the sacrifices were no problem for him, he had plenty of animals to choose from — but he would see these people.

Poor people — lots of them, frankly, ragged.

I mean, I work with animals, but when I go out, I put on some decent clothes.

So my father said to himself, Look how these people love God! This is a good thing.

And look at how God works in their lives — he was always talking this way; I remember when we were kids, he always talked to us about "God working in your life" — not just a God far off in the heavens, but working, right here on earth, invisibly.

Anyway, he would see all these people at the temple to worship God and sacrifice to God, and he would say to himself, This is a good thing. They're devoting themselves to God, and God is working in their lives.

But they're poor. We should help them. How can we help them?, my father would say.

Then there were people from out of town. People from far to the north, in Galilee — oy! Galileans! Which do you want to smell, a goat or a Galilean? That was the joke, anyway.

But they would come to Jerusalem from all the way up there in Galilee — traveling all the way around the sea to the east, of course, to avoid stepping on Samaritan soil and becoming religiously unclean — I

mean, what point is it to come all the way to the temple to worship God if you're going to arrive ceremonially unclean? Do you visit a friend and spit in the soup?

And these people — Galileans, Jews from other countries, some from far in the south — poor schnooks who for some reason got stuck living down in the Decapolis — they would come to Jerusalem, to the temple, and they would need sacrificial animals.
How can we help them?, my father would say.

And then there were the city dwellers.
People right there in Jerusalem, people who lived way closer to the temple than we did, out on the farm.
They had no space for pens, for keeping animals.
They had to get animals for sacrifice from somewhere.
To obey God, to make him happy.
How can we help them be God's people?, my father would say.

This is how my father was always thinking and talking.
He was like, what do you call it? A humanitarian or something.
He loved people.
Loved God. Loved people.
How can more people participate in this wonderful process, this enriching experience, of temple worship?
If we could make it easier for them, would more people do it?, he would say. Maybe!

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So when I was still a very little guy, I remember my father announcing to the family that we would start a small side business.
He had arranged for a place on the grounds of the temple — do I need to explain this to you? The layout?
It was courtyards and pillars and steps and porches and various areas — it's not important.
We set up there, where people came and went for temple worship and sacrifices.
Perfect location, if you wanted to help somebody get the animals they needed.
Help people express their love for God.

Those were exciting days, for me as a kid, let me tell you.

Some guys remember fishing trips and mountain climbing from when they were kids, but I remember the temple courts. People with all different kinds of languages and different kinds of clothing and different kinds of money. You had to have a currency exchange right there in the temple courts because so many people were bringing money from other countries. It was busy, busy, busy. Business was good. Business was great.

I came of age, there was no question I would work in the livestock business with my father. In fact, the temple part of the business got so big, so complicated — so profitable — my father needed someone to be totally in charge of nothing but that. So he chose me.

And then — bang! He dropped dead. Just like that. Way ahead of his time. My mother was shattered. I was rattled, I can tell you that. Suddenly I'm the man of the house, running the farm, responsible for the temple business, all these employees, all this pressure. Actually my father had a pretty good guy managing the farm under him — Shebaniah, worked for our family for years — so I just promoted him to executive manager and left him there running the farm, and I stayed on the temple side of the business. What I knew.

But it was still a difficult time, you can imagine. I had never been in charge of such expenses, such complicated business operations, you know what I mean? I didn't need more trouble. And yet trouble came.

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It was almost time for Passover, business was brisk, we could hardly keep up. You have to plan your inventory, and — well, you don't need all that information; suffice it to say business was brisk. And then, out of the blue, in the middle of the business day, this guy comes raging through the temple courts, swinging some kind of a whip, looked like it was made out of cords. He's hitting the dealers, they're screaming and running, knocking over chairs and tables.

I was on the opposite side of the courtyard when he started, and I can't believe what I'm seeing.

There are sheep wailing and running everywhere, the cattle are bellowing, they're zigzagging all over the place, knocking furniture over, people are dodging them.

This guy is slapping cows on their rumps to get them to move faster, he's shooing the sheep, clapping his hands.

I'm like frozen at first. I don't know what to do.

Our pigeons and doves are flapping in their cages, screaming like crazy.

Our lambs and goats are scrambling around in the little pen we had set up there.

I'm yelling instructions to Lamech, my assistant, to keep the animals together.

But I'm also watching this guy, this — this *assailant* — clearing out the whole courtyard; and he's coming our way.

He gets to Shimrath, the money-changer, and he swings that whip across the top of his table — coins go flying everywhere.

Then he picks up the corner of the table and tosses it — Shimrath is still sitting there, his mouth is wide open, he's just looking at the guy.

It's chaos!

And then he gets to me.

It all happened too fast for me to be some kind of hero and fight back.

He strides up and grabs one of our dove cages by the top; he lifts it up in front of my face and kind of shakes it, and he yells, "Get these out of here!"

And then he sticks it in my arms, and his eyes are flashing at me, but his voice is really even — he's not squawking like a crazy man would — and he says, "How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!"

I couldn't speak. I was dumbfounded. I was also waiting for him to swing that whip at me, in which case I was preparing to duck.

And then he just turns and stalks away. Walks through all this chaos, taking these big steps, and heads back out of the courtyard.

And his words are ringing in my ears.

"My Father's house."

His father's house? Who was he? If this was anybody's house, it was *my* father's house.

A market? Yeah. We built up a good business here.

Who *was* this guy?

Well, I learned soon enough. Everybody was talking about it.
 This was the guy Jesus, they said he claimed to be God's own Son — not
 just a son of Israel, I mean the actual Messiah.
 I heard later that he could do miracles, like heal people and cast out
 demons.
 They said even before he got to the temple he had gone to a wedding and
 turned water into wine.
 I'm thinking, You've got to be kidding!

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It took us the rest of the day to get the place cleaned up.
 Some guys had broken chairs and tables; we were lucky.
 That night I was exhausted.
 What a day!
 I'm thinking, I wonder if this guy is going to be back tomorrow.
 This is bad for business.

But you know what? It wasn't long before that old song was running
 through my head again:
Zeal for your house will consume me.
 And I thought about that Jesus. Swinging those cords. Slapping those
 cows. His eyes glaring at me. Shaking that dove cage in my face.
 And the intensity of his voice.
 "How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!"

* * *

Well, he didn't come back the next day.
 Halfway through the day there was a rumor that he was coming, and a few
 of the sellers closed up shop and headed home.
 But nothing came of it.
 I was relieved, frankly.
 I had a business to run, people depended on me.

And may I just say, business continued to go well.
 I had to hire another guy to work with me.
 I should also admit, the Pharisees really helped.
 They were herding people into the temple. Pushing them to make the
 sacrifices, and do it all properly.
 I applauded this. People were being too lax.

They seemed to think they could just depend on God to be there for them without fulfilling all the obligations, doing what the religious bosses said to do to make God happy.

And if, as a side-effect, people had to come through my place of business — if they had to come to me in order to get to God, you might say — well, that was good for the bottom line.

I was a responsible businessman.

It doesn't make sense to be in business if you don't seize every opportunity, right?

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Over the next two years, maybe three, I heard about this Jesus guy more and more.

He was here, he was there. He was doing this amazing thing, that amazing thing.

The stories were unbelievable.

Some people were saying, Yeah, he's the Messiah. And other people were saying, What, our religious leaders are clueless? How can they all be wrong?

I would say, the way it seemed to me, over time Jesus was getting to be more popular with the average everyday people, and less popular with the religious authorities — like there was more of a division between the leaders and the people.

Mostly I kept my mouth shut, because taking sides on something like this can't be good for business.

But privately I did say to myself, At least with the leadership so hostile toward this guy, it will keep him out of Jerusalem — he would be crazy to come back here — and that's just fine with me.

I got to know the authorities better during that time.

I was able to swing a pretty good deal with them, which helped them and it helped me. Here's what I mean:

They ruled that all the animals for all the sacrifices had to be ceremonially perfect, and the priests were the only ones who could certify that an animal was acceptable.

But at Passover time, you had so many people and you needed so many animals, you could never get this accomplished in time — so we arranged for the priests to inspect enormous numbers of animals *in advance*.

And then we would keep these animals in a special area at the temple, and at Passover, sell the animals — and of course there was a

commission for the priests; after all, they were working hard, inspecting all these animals.

So we had to raise our prices, to cover the costs — you know, thinking back to when my father started the business, we were selling animals for 15 times as much. This is good business!

But it was still helping people, you understand, because they had to have the animals, and they had to be inspected, if they wanted to please God — you get the idea.

“What’s good for God is good for people; what’s good for people is good for business.”

So. I thought we were all set. I thought we were in good shape.

I thought it would go on like this and everything’s all right.

But then this Jesus problem reared its ugly head again.

One day I heard the gossip — that Jesus was just outside the city, in Bethany village, and he was heading into the city, and he had gotten so popular with the common people that throngs of them were celebrating like he was going to become king or something — and I tell you, I could feel the hairs standing up on the back of my neck.

This couldn’t be happening, could it? It’s another crazy rumor, right?

The Pharisees aren’t going to let this guy take over, are they?

The Sanhedrin has to step in here, don’t they?

And do you know what? I couldn’t believe my eyes.

I look up, and here he comes again. Exactly the same.

He’s yelling — no whip in his hand this time, but still — he’s driving out the salespeople, driving out the workers.

Flinging the money-changers’ tables, and coins are clinking all over and rolling everywhere.

I yelled for Lamech to round up the merchandise.

I said, “Let’s get out of here.”

We were scrambling as fast as we could.

Meanwhile Jesus is moving down a row of benches, where most of the dove-sellers sat; they’ve all run away already, but he’s just kicking the benches over, one after another.

Klonk! Thunk! Klonk! Thunk!

And I’m thinking, this is taking *zeal for God’s house* to a whole new level!

He started running from portal to portal, stopping anybody who was coming in carrying anything for sale. Turning them around, pushing them away.

And he's quoting from the Torah — calling out the Scripture at the top of his lungs:

"You know what's written!" he says. "My house will be called a house of prayer!" he yells. "But you've made it a den of robbers!"

"Robbers!"

That was offensive to me. Robbers!

But I wasn't going to stand around and argue with him.

Lamech and my new worker and I rounded up our gear so we could pack out of there, get out of harm's way.

I was thinking, Where are the priests when you need them? They need to deal with this guy. This is crazy.

But this time, Jesus didn't just turn around and walk away.

Vendors were packing their stuff up as fast as they could and heading out, but other people were streaming past them coming *into* the courtyard.

It looked like they had been following Jesus into town, they were dirty and sweaty and noisy — these were the riffraff, let me tell you.

They had sick people with them. Some were carrying relatives who couldn't walk. Some were straggling along on canes.

I counted at least five different blind people being led by people.

They swamped the courtyard. They were all pushing to get close to Jesus.

And here's what I saw: he *changed*. I mean it.

As these people gathered around him, suddenly he wasn't the gladiator anymore.

Now, his face changed; it softened.

He smiled; he touched these people and gave hugs and threw his head back and laughed.

I got Lamech and my other worker situated, and I got *them* on the road toward the farm.

But *I* turned back around and went back in. I wanted to see what was going on.

Jesus had turned the whole place into his own. The whole courtyard, it's like it was *his*.

He was talking and talking — quoting from the Torah, explaining different ideas, I guess you would say — and then he would reach out to

someone and ask what they needed, and I saw this myself: a crippled man stood up and walked.

Then a blind woman — I'm thinking, What is a *woman* doing here, at the temple? This is not allowed. But Jesus touched her, and she started squealing and crying.

"I can see! I can see!"

She went flying out of there with her family members — jumping up and down, she could hardly run — she was so happy!

Everybody was shouting and laughing and clapping their hands — this whole huge circle of people around this Jesus.

It was like a festival or something.

It wasn't like a temple, I can tell you that.

It wasn't religious; it wasn't appropriate.

It was obvious to me now, the rumors were true: he was popular with the unwashed masses.

I could see how it could happen.

It was like he was one of them.

It was like he actually loved them.

And he could help them — I mean, these healings, whatever — so of course they stuck with him.

I confess, I couldn't help but hear my father's voice, from when I was a kid, talking about God "working" in people's lives.

Maybe this was that, I don't know.

But honestly, I thought, this won't last.

The priests can't allow this.

I saw a couple of them around the outer edges of the courtyard later in the day, but there were too many people in there, too many people obviously enamored of this Jesus, for the priests to take any kind of action against him.

So the priests pretty soon slipped away.

They let him go on.

He stayed in there all day. Talking with people and laughing and touching them and healing people — it was amazing.

On the one hand, I can see how someone would say, Now, that — that was beautiful.

On the other hand, this was not good for the temple business.

On the other hand, to be honest — business issues aside — I saw it with my own eyes, and — it *was* beautiful. I have to admit.
 To see people so happy. It was beautiful.
 To see people so happy in the temple, that was a little strange to me.
 But it was strange and beautiful.

* * *

I lost my taste for it after that.
 The Sanhedrin, I guess, arranged for Jesus to be arrested, I guess they got him executed, then I heard some say he came back from the dead; I don't know about that.
 But after that, whenever I looked around that temple courtyard, thinking about that blind woman jumping up and down and squealing and running, everybody laughing and roaring, celebrating — or I would think about Jesus looking me in the eye the way he did — or I would find myself humming that old song — *Zeal for your house will consume me* — I don't know.

I sold the temple business, went back to the farm, concentrated on the wool business.
 Didn't make as much money, but didn't care as much about the money anymore, so, whatever.

Maybe you could say I didn't feel the same about the temple anymore.
 I didn't feel the same about the business, anyway.
 I wasn't really sure *what* to think about Jesus.

Or maybe — maybe this is what happened: maybe I couldn't tell anymore what to think about people, and God.
 I mean about God and people, together. About people, what could you call it? — connecting to God.
 The temple, the sacrifices, the animals, the money, the priests — I always thought *this* was about people connecting to God.
 But after Jesus showed up, all of that stuff started to feel heavy to me or something, I don't know how to put it.
 Heavy, compared to what Jesus did in there.
 It was a different kind of "zeal for God's house."
 What he did in there — that — seemed *light*.
 Carefree.
 Strange and beautiful and somehow right.