

What is the Temple for?

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[0 : 00] When the Romans invaded and occupied a country, which of course they did quite a lot of, their practice was not to ban local religions but to try to find similarities with local gods and their Roman gods and persuade everyone that they were all just the same gods but with different names.

Then at some point a more Romanized version of the local gods name would appear and eventually the Roman name would start to be used. So very clever propaganda, very good diluting of local deities and very good subsuming of one religion into another and thus making the whole world Rome.

And on the whole it worked. And to all that is they invaded and occupied Israel. The Jewish people resisted any Romanizing or diluting of their religion and resisted the idea that there was more than one God.

And eventually the Romans gave up and allowed them to practice their religion as they wanted. And for the Jews, all the religious beliefs centered on the temple in Jerusalem.

Inside the temple behind that great curtain, the place called the Holy of Holies, the Ark of the Covenant, which contained the most sacred objects. All Jews, whoever they lived, built an obligation to visit Jerusalem and celebrate the Passover at the temple at least once in their lives.

[1 : 29] And these visits would last many weeks. So we can't underestimate the importance of the temple in Jewish, religious and cultural and civic life. The question we're asking this morning is, what is the temple for?

And it might seem that we've already answered it there. But Jesus' actions in the temple courtyard suggest that there was more and through his actions and what he says that we can see.

And that the temple is a place of prayer. It's a place where the needy can come. And it's a place of praise. Verse 12 to 13 says, And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple.

And he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. He said to them, It is written, My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you make it a den of robbers.

And the part of the temple where this market had been was called the court of the Gentiles. And his name suggests it was a place in the temple where non-Jews could come and worship God.

[2 : 36] And it was entirely proper that such a place existed in God's temple. Way back in Genesis 12, when God first made his covenant with Abraham, promises that through Abraham's family, all the families in the world would be blessed.

In Exodus and Leviticus, we see provision made for foreigners, the laws that God set out for proper worship of him. And then in Isaiah 42, God tells them that through that prophet, that they are going to be a light to the nation.

So through this chosen nation, God would be revealed to all peoples. So there must be a place for those people to worship through God. But the religious authorities had allowed the selling of animals for the sacrifices and booths to be set up to change into the money that could be used to buy them.

And this probably chaotic and noisy place is hardly what you would think of as a good place to pray and worship. Jesus did not want anything to get in the way of people praying and sharing in fellowship with the Father.

Jesus championed the cause of people who could advance no further into the temple and made sure that their place of prayer was a place where prayer could actually take place.

[3 : 53] Now hardly anyone, if you ask them, would say they find prayer easy. Not that they don't know how to pray or that they should pray or even that prayer is effective. Just that most of us don't

always find it easy.

And of course there are lots of reasons for that. There are many good books that provide guidance. But for this morning we concentrate on the one aspect that Jesus dealt with here. And that is distractions that make prayer difficult.

Now, some people here might be coming close to doing exams. For some of you it might have been quite a long time since you last had an exam. But I wonder if you think back to when you were studying, what helped you?

Lots of people like to have music in the background or even people chatting in the background when they're studying. They would find silence when studying difficult. Some people thrive when studying in groups in the library and find that talking things through is a benefit to them.

During the lockdown when so many young people had to do their schoolwork and studies in isolation, one enterprising girl offered to connect with others via Zoom so they could study together.

[5 : 03] And they were connected virtually. They didn't really talk. They didn't really do anything together. But they just both studied in each other's presence. And for them it felt like having someone in the room with them.

And that was very popular. Lots of people started doing these Zoom calls and studying together. Of course, for others any sort of distraction prevents them from concentrating and they prefer quiet. I'm more in that latter category. I find it very easy to be distracted by noise. And I prefer to have quiet when reading or studying. So for some, quiet is a distraction.

And for some, noise is a distraction. And to do our best studying, we need to deal with that distraction. And the same is true in our prayer lives. Perhaps part of the reason we find prayer difficult is that we either allow distractions, but we haven't really worked out what these distractions might be.

I mentioned earlier that there are many really good books on prayer that can help us. This one is a particularly good one, I think. How to Pray by Pete Gregg. And this is the book that, when we've done the prayer course in church, this is the book that that course is based on.

[6 : 09] It's a really excellent book. Very practical, very accessible. And a really good place to start for reading about prayer. Early on in the book, he gives a couple of ideas which might be of help when thinking about things that distract us from prayer.

Firstly, he says it can be helpful to find a time. Of course, all our lives are different. We all have periods when we're busy and have lots of demands on our time. When I was growing up in church, our minister always used to say, we must have blanket victory.

Which by which he meant, you've got to get out of bed early every morning to pray. But of course, that doesn't work for everyone. But if we're able to find a time when it's possible to have some peace, we could make that a time when we pray.

And of course, it need not be for a long time. It need not even be every day. But we can ask God to show us when that might be. Most related to that is finding a place.

There's a story about a man who bought a rocking chair. And he sat in front of his window and every morning, he got his blanket victory, that guy, 20 minutes early. And he spent that time looking out his window to pray.

[7 : 14] That sounds very nice. Probably very impractical for most people. But regular activities can help. Like you're walking your dog or going for newspaper.

You're exercising or commuting and so on. For each one of us, it's going to be something different. And all these things, we can ask God to show us what will work for us. And the whole time, we can keep in mind the thought that God is longing to hear from us in prayer.

And to build us up in our faith and love of him as we spend time talking to him. And Jesus demonstrated the importance he put on this in a dramatic fashion in the story that we've read this morning.

When he thought people were being kept from prayer, he drove those distracted away. So let's not allow anything in our lives to distract us from prayer. The second thing we see is that the temple is a place where the needy can come to the Father.

Read in verse 14 and 15. The blind and the lame came to him in the temple and he healed them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that he did and the children crying out in the temple, Hosanna to the son of David, they were indignant.

[8 : 25] And to be physically disabled in those times was to be in a very precarious situation. No kind of welfare state, no official body could turn to you for help.

You were on your own. The only way you could be looked after is if you had family, who would care for you, or on the charity of strangers. And all the way through the Old Testament, we see God's care for those who were unable to look after themselves.

He put an obligation on the people not to abuse anyone in these situations and to help and provide for them. But perhaps like so many other rules, the religious authorities were not obeying these commands from God.

Or they were devising ways around them so they could obey in word but not in deed. There was a strong sense from them that out of sight and out of mind was how they preferred it to be. But Jesus was different.

Read through the Gospels. Jesus said, The people cried out, Hosanna.

[9 : 54] And we read of the crowds calling out that word as part of a celebration. And when they see Jesus entering Jerusalem on a donkey only a little while later, as we will be looking at ourselves in a few weeks in Palm Sunday, the word means save us or save us now.

And in the context of Jesus caring for people in this court of the temple, of him making space for them to pray and healing those most in need, we can see it as a cry of hope and restoration.

It was a cry from people who were the lowest in that society. Jesus was there for them. And when we read and hear about Jesus' love of outcasts, we are glad. Because it shows that Jesus talked about love, but also demonstrated it in everything he did.

But Jesus' arms of love do not only stretch around those whose society has turned your backs on. Jesus' arms of love stretches around everyone. The Hosanna cry is a cry of help for the whole world.

You will know the things in your heart that you can and do cry out to God for. And they aren't always physical or financial. The encouragement from our passage this morning is that Jesus cleared the way in the temple that day so that we can all cry out, Hosanna, Jesus save me.

[11 : 08] Do Jesus. And know that he will hear us and respond. How he's going to respond can be as different as the people who are crying out to him, as different as each burden we lay before him.

Look at how he responded to people who came to him in the Gospels. Every situation was treated differently. Every person listened to each request answered accordingly.

The third thing that we see from our passage is that the temple is a place where we can praise the Father. The final part of our passage says, And they said to him, You hear what these are saying? And Jesus said to them, Yes, have you never read, Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babes, Do you have prepared praise? Being together with God's people is a joy, at least most of the time. And being able to join together in worship is part of that joy. And when I was young, my mum would buy us ice cream cones. I used to think that my dad was really boring. All he ever had was vanilla ice cream.

[12 : 08] Of course now, whenever I have ice cream, all I ever have is vanilla. But once we were, as a family, we were up north visiting some family. We went to a place called Hopman's. Anyone ever been there?

Very small place. Very nice. And that, at least then, had a very nice ice cream shop. So we decided to have an ice cream. And I thought, Well, why not be adventurous?

But as adventurous as I usually get, I was going to try pistachio ice. Which does sound like it should be nice. But in fact, isn't very. At least not to me. And I was very regretting not sticking to boring old vanilla on that occasion.

But of course, we all like our different flavours of ice cream. And of course, we all also appreciate different flavours of worship. And it's a blessing to the church. And there's so many different songs and hymn writers whose God-given gifts are an inspiration that help draw us into God's presence. Again, we see the important part of this, that Jesus cleared the temple courtyard so that people could praise the Father. Just like prayer, just like bringing our needs to God, Jesus felt that it was too important to allow something to get in the way of people's freedom to worship.

[13 : 19] And it's a reminder to us today to think about what kinds of things we allow to get in the way of our worship to God. Of course, worship goes much further than singing together on a Sunday or maybe on a cafe church or Kingdom Builders or things like that.

