

Images of Resurrection

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Overview

The Lord Jesus loved to teach in parables and figures of speech. In his teaching, the kingdom of God could be a field; the last judgment, a wedding feast; Israel a fig tree. This love of figurative language extended to his own teaching about his death and resurrection. I have been able to recall three such images—can you think of others? Each of these conveys a distinct message about the most important event in history, when the Son of God died for us and rose again. Consider these in historical order.

Reference	Image	Lessons	Later Echoes
John 2:19	Destruction and rebuilding of a temple	His person The nature of those who opposed him. Duration His victory over his adversaries	Matt 26:60,61; 27:40
Matt 12:40	Jonah in the fish	Duration God's wrath upon him.	
John 12:24	The Grain of Wheat	Fruitfulness Change in form.	1 Cor 15

Destruction and Rebuilding of a Temple, John 2:13-22 (19)

“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”

Setting

John records three Passovers at which the Lord was at Jerusalem, and this is the first (v.13), thus toward the beginning of his ministry.

“This Temple”: Jesus is the Temple of God

A temple is a building in which God can dwell among his people.

Originally, God asked Israel to build him, not a temple, but a tabernacle, a tent. The purpose was given in Exod 25:8, “let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them.” This has always been God’s purpose with his people:

- In Eden, he came to the garden to enjoy fellowship with his creature, Man.
- Isaiah 12:6 Cry out and shout, thou inhabitant of Zion: for great *is* the Holy One of Israel in the midst of thee.
- Revelation 21:3 And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God *is* with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, *and be* their God.

John earlier used this image in his prolog, when he said, “The word was made flesh, and dwelt among us” (literally, “tabernacled”) (1:14).

In calling his body a temple, the Lord is claiming that God dwells there. As a physical body, he is human, but he is also “the Lord from Heaven” (1 Cor 15:47).

Why does he call his body a “temple” rather than a “tabernacle”? Answer: because the enemies of Israel never destroyed the tabernacle, but they did destroy the temple, and he wants to develop that parallel.

“Destroy”: His adversaries are like the Babylonians

To appreciate our Lord’s charge here against his adversaries, we must remember that the destruction of the temple by the Babylonians is remembered by the Jews to this day as the most tragic aspect of the captivity. See Zech 7:1-3 for a record of the custom of fasting in the fifth month, the month of Ab. There were other fast days for other aspects of the captivity (Zech 8:19): in the fourth month (when Jerusalem fell), the seventh (when Gedaliah, the governor of Judah under the Babylonians, was assassinated), and the tenth (when the siege of Jerusalem began), but the outstanding fast marking the captivity is the ninth of Ab, in the fifth month, singled out in 7:1-3. This was done in commemoration of the destruction of the temple, Jer 52:12, and is still commemorated among the Jews.

By accusing the Jews of “destroying this temple,” he is emphasizing that they are spiritually no better than the pagan Babylonians. As Peter said on the day of Pentecost, “ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain” (Acts 2:23). The defilement of the temple that he is rebuking in John 2 is only a precursor to the far more violent sacrilege they will commit when they destroy the incarnate temple, the body of the Messiah.

“In three days”: His death will last only three days

He indicates the precise duration of his death. The Lord repeatedly foretold not only that he would die, but also that he would rise, and the delay between the two (cf. Mark 8:31; 9:31-32; 10:33-34). This detail ought to have encouraged his disciples in the interim (though their faith was weak and they did not believe what he had promised). His adversaries paid more attention to it than his disciples did. It was the reason they asked for a Roman guard over his tomb (Matt 27:63), and thus they are particularly without excuse in rejecting him after he fulfilled this promise.

“I will raise it up”: He has the power to return from the dead

One theme we must never miss in the death and resurrection of our Lord is that he is in control. John 10:17-18, “Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again. 18 No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father.” In the same breath in which Peter declares the wickedness of those who slew the Lord, he also insists that Christ was “delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God.” So when the Lord emphasizes the wickedness of those who will slay him, he also emphasizes that he remains firmly in control.

Later Echoes in the NT

This rebuke was not lost on the Jews. They made it the basis of their condemnation of him (Matt 26:60f), and mocked him for it on the cross (Matt 27:40).

Jonah in the Fish, Matt 12:40

“For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”

Setting

This conversation with the scribes and Pharisees takes place in Galilee, early in the last year of the Lord's earthly ministry. They are seeking a sign, and he offers them his resurrection.

“Three Days and Three Nights”

As in John 2, so here the Lord emphasizes the duration between his death and his resurrection. Again, he does so in conversation with his adversaries, so that they will have no excuse when he actually does follow this schedule.

“As Jonas ... So the Son of Man”

Jonah had to spend his three days and nights in the great fish because he had sinned against the Lord, in running away from the mission God had for him in Nineveh. He confesses this when he prays to the Lord from the fish's belly (2:3), “For thou hadst cast me into the deep, in the midst of the seas; and the floods compassed me about: all thy billows and thy waves passed over me.” Even though the sailors physically cast him into the sea (1:15), the real cause for his suffering was that he was sinful.

By comparing himself with Jonah, our Lord not only emphasizes the *duration* of his death, but also its *cause*, that he (like Jonah) died for sin. The difference, of course, is that Jonah suffered for his own sin, while our Lord had no sin of his own, but bore our sin when he died for us.

The Grain of Wheat, John 12:24

“Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.”

Setting

This statement occurred on Palm Sunday or shortly after, as our Lord's passion is less than a week away. The shadow of the cross looms dark across his consciousness. What was it that enabled him to bear the anticipation and the suffering?

- Heb 12:2, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame

What was that joy? Phil. 2 makes it clear that it was the honor that the Father gave him—and the heart of that honor is being worshipped by those whom he has redeemed.

- John 12:32, And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all *men* unto me.
- Isa 49:6 And he said, It is a light thing that thou shouldest be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel: I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth.

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- Isaiah 53:11 He shall see of the travail of his soul, *and* shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities.

“Much Fruit”

He endured the cross because of his love for us, and the desire to bring us life, and this desire is captured in the third image. A single seed falls into the ground, and to all appearances, dies, but from it there springs an abundant harvest.

The Lord’s imagery here is inspired by the OT. Passover was one of four closely coupled sacred seasons for Israel (Lev 23):

- v. 5, the feast of Passover on the 14th day of the first month;
- vv. 6-8, the feast of unleavened bread, 15th-21st (the week after Passover)
- vv. 9-11, the waving of the sheaf of firstfruits, the morning after the Sabbath in the week of unleavened bread. Two things to note about the firstfruits:
 - Academic: This ritual determined the Jewish calendar. Passover had to occur when the spring crops were just at the right time to provide the firstfruits, and this made the determination whether to add an extra month to their lunar calendar.
 - Critical to our purpose: Christ died either at the same time as the Passover lambs (John) or the next day (synoptics). That is when the grain of wheat fell into the ground. When did the first sprouts spring up? At Christ’s resurrection, which was ... the morning after the Sabbath in the week of unleavened bread!
- Vv. 15-16, the offering of firstfruits is the starting point from which seven weeks were counted to Pentecost. Pentecost marked the end of barley harvest, and most of the wheat harvest, so it was a harvest festival. Spiritually, it was the date the Lord chose to send the Spirit on the believers; the birthday of the church. Israel’s harvest festival thus corresponded with the “much fruit” that sprang from our Lord’s single seed.

Later Echoes in the NT

The first image focused on the role of his enemies in his death, and they were the ones who echoed it. The last image focuses on what his death means to his friends, and they echo it later in the NT. In particular, 1 Cor 15:20, 23 develops the picture of firstfruits that Christ himself likely had in mind in using the image of the seed in the first place.

Summary

What is the meaning of the resurrection?

- From the image of the temple in John 2, it shows his sovereign control even over his enemies as they wickedly sought to destroy him.
- From the image of Jonah in Matt 12, it reminds us that he bore our sins when he died, and that his resurrection promises us that our sins are gone.
- From the image of the seed in John 12, it reminds us that he offered himself out of love for us, and we are the fruit that springs from his sacrifice.