

John 11:47-57

Introduction

Last time we were in John, we saw Jesus go up for the final time to Judea (11:7) so that through the raising of Lazarus He might be “*glorified*” (11:4). Now we know what this means. It was the raising of Lazarus that would set in motion the events leading to Jesus’ *death*. And it was only in and through Jesus’ *death* that the raising of Lazarus could then become a truly saving revelation of the *glory* Jesus had with the Father before the world began (cf. 11:25, 40). We left off, last time, with verses 45-46 of John chapter eleven:

- John 11:45–46 — Therefore many of the Jews who came to Mary, and saw what He had done, believed in Him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them the things which Jesus had done.

And now we continue in verse 47:

I. John 11:47a — Therefore the chief priests and the Pharisees convened a council [*synedrion*; Sanhedrin],

In other words, this has been the final straw.

The Pharisees *by themselves* couldn’t make or carry out any judicial decisions.* The highest governing body in the land was the Jewish Sanhedrin, which, under the Romans, controlled all the affairs of the Jews. The Sanhedrin was a judicial, and a legislative, and—through the high priest—an executive body all at the same time, and it was assumed that in the absence of a Davidic king the Sanhedrin ruled for God and executed God’s own decision (theocratic rule). In Jesus’ day the Sanhedrin was composed mostly of “chief priests” (priests taken from the extended family of the high priest, who presided over the council), and virtually all the priests were Sadducees. The Pharisees, on the other hand, were a powerful minority. So when the chief priests and the Pharisees convene a council, we understand that now they’re truly in earnest. When the chief priests and the Pharisees convene a council, we understand that things have escalated, now, to the highest level.

II. John 11:47b–48 — ...and [they] were saying, “What are we doing? For this man is performing many signs. If we let Him go on like this, all men will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and [our] nation.”

Until now the “worry” of the Jewish leadership has been about theological error and even blasphemy (cf. 5:9-10, 18; 8:58-59; 9:14-16, 24; 10:31-33). So they’ve fretted about all the “ignorant” masses being led astray and deceived (cf. 7:48-49). But were they really concerned about the truth and about God’s glory? They really did think they were. Were they really concerned about the ignorant masses? Maybe they deceived themselves into thinking they were. But what they were really concerned about was keeping the status quo – and the status quo meant their own positions of honor, and influence, and respectability, and authority. How often

* This description of the Sanhedrin is a paraphrase of Carson.

do we really think we're concerned for God's truth and God's glory, when in fact we've subtly defined His truth and His glory in terms of our own self-serving interests? The chief priests and the Pharisees openly admit that "this man" is performing many signs. But because they've deceived themselves into thinking they're concerned about God's truth and God's glory, *therefore* they conclude without a second thought that "this man" must be an imposter. They take it for granted that the signs He performs—rather than authenticating His message—are only proving just how dangerous and sinister He must be. Do you see how "sincere" and how "genuine" the blindness and hardness of our hearts can be? The blindness of the chief priests and Pharisees is proof of the words of Abraham to Lazarus who was in Hades:

➤ Luke 16:31 — "If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced *if someone should rise from the dead.*"

This horrible blindness of the chief priests and Pharisees is a constant caution and warning to all of us.

Now here in our passage this morning, we see that the "theological" worry of the Jewish leadership is mixed with a political worry: "If we let Him go on like this, all men [the ignorant masses] will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our *place* and [our] *nation.*" Obviously, they haven't listened to Jesus, because if they had they would know that He had not come to stir up rebellion against Rome and that He would never approve of such a thing. But once again it's their deeply rooted attachment to the status quo and the preservation of their own self-interests that's produced in them a very "genuine" fear that the enthusiasm of the people will spread and grow until one day it produces such chaos and disorder that the Romans will come and take away both "our place and [our] nation." Their fear is genuine and real, and yet inexcusable and blameworthy at the same time – because it flows from blinded minds and hardened hearts. The chief priest and Pharisees believe that they're concerned above all else for God's temple ("our *place*"; cf. Jer. 7:14; Acts 6:13-14; 21:28) and God's people ("our *nation*"), but their choice of words betrays them: "The Romans will come and take away both *our* place [the temple] and [*our*] nation [the people]." They "genuinely" believe they're concerned for God's temple and God's people, but in fact they're only concerned for the privilege and the position that the existence of the temple and the people have afforded to them. What are the ways that we turn even our Christian faith and service into something "self-serving" and "self-centered" rather than being truly concerned with *God's* glory and the good of others? What are the ways that we assign to ourselves the best and purest of motives when, in fact, we're still being driven by our own self-serving interests?

"What are we doing?" the chief priests and Pharisees ask. "If we let [this man] go on like this, all men will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and [our] nation." The terrible irony is that it would be precisely *because* of the council's decision to put "this man" to death that God will send the Romans to execute His judgment on the temple and the people in 70 AD – to take away both their "place" and their "nation" (cf. Mat. 22:1-7; 23:37-39). The thing that the chief priests and Pharisees most feared and sought to avoid is the very thing they brought down upon themselves. In a similar way, every unrepentant sinner is seeking to avoid misery, and yet misery is, in the end, what every unrepentant sinner brings down upon himself. Oh, the terrible futility of sin!

The council has deliberated but apparently is unable to come to any conclusion. What they've been doing until now, they know, isn't enough, and yet they still seem unable to justify the death sentence for Jesus.

III. John 11:49–50 — But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all, nor do you take into account that it is expedient for you that one man die for the people, and that the whole nation not perish.”

Caiaphas' point is simple: Compared to the greater evil (the destruction of the whole nation) the lesser evil (the death of one innocent man *instead*)—if He *is* innocent—becomes something *good*. In other words, the question now has ceased to be whether Jesus is guilty and deserving of death. Even *if* He's not, He must be sacrificed for the good of the people. If we didn't know better, we could think that Caiaphas understands who Jesus is and what He's come to do. We might even think he really does care for the people. But, in fact, he's supremely arrogant (“you know nothing at all”), he's supremely self-serving (“it is expedient *for you*” – and, therefore, “for me”), and he's supremely calloused (it is good to put to death an innocent man [even the Son of God] if we are convinced that his death will avert the destruction of an entire nation). Caiaphas cares nothing for Jesus or for the Jewish people or for God's truth and glory. He cares only for preserving the status quo—and in that status quo his own self-serving interests. Nothing could be more wicked—nothing could be more evil—than what Caiaphas says here. And yet we read in verse 51:

IV. John 11:51 — Now he did not say this on his own initiative, but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation,

Here is an astonishing thing!—That Caiaphas in his wickedness and in the act of *expressing* that wickedness should actually be *prophesying* the saving, redeeming work of God!

On the one hand, Caiaphas knew very well what he was saying. He wasn't a puppet with no control over the words coming out of his mouth. Caiaphas spoke of Jesus being sacrificed for the good of the people, so that because of His death, the whole nation (*conceived of as an ethnic and political people*) might not perish. But, in fact, in the terms in which Caiaphas was thinking, the nation (as an ethnic and political people) did perish – precisely *because* Jesus was put to death. In the terms in which Caiaphas was thinking, Jesus did not die so that the nation would not perish, but rather the nation perished because Jesus died.

On the one hand, Caiaphas knew very well what he was saying, even if he was wholly misguided and wrong. On the other hand, Caiaphas had no idea at all what he was saying. Caiaphas spoke of Jesus being sacrificed for the good of the people, so that because of His death, the whole nation (*conceived of as an ethnic and political nation*) might not perish. But the nation of Israel was more than just something ethnic and political. At Mount Sinai God had spoken to Israel through Moses:

- Exodus 19:5–6 — Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a **holy nation**.

The Old Covenant, with its outward ceremonial laws, set ethnic Israel apart as a *holy* nation—not in substance, but outwardly as a shadow and a type of the true holiness of the heart. Ethnic Israel, set apart by the Old Covenant as a “holy nation,” was a shadow and type of the Israel that would be set apart by the New Covenant as a truly holy nation – a nation defined no longer by ethnicity and external purity laws, but defined by a true holiness of the heart. And so it’s for *this* “holy” nation—typified by Old Covenant Israel—that Jesus would die. Jesus would die in order that this chosen and elect and holy “nation” might not perish but have eternal life (cf. 3:16). What did Caiaphas say? “It is expedient for you that one man die *for the people*, and that the whole nation *not perish*.” Truly, Jesus will be sacrificed for the good of the people, so that because of His death, God’s elect and holy nation might not perish! Caiaphas, in his evil and wickedness, spoke more truly than he could possibly know; and he also spoke of more wondrous realities than he could possibly conceive of.

But there’s more. “Being high priest that year, [Caiaphas] prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation,” and then he goes on to say in verse 52:

V. John 11:52 — “...and not for the nation only, but in order that He might also gather [*synago*] together into one the children of God who are scattered [*diaskorpizo*] abroad.

Did Caiaphas unwittingly prophesy all this as well, or is John just adding something more here on his own? The awesome answer is this: The words of Caiaphas, understood not in the light of his own intentions but in the light of their Scriptural context and in the light of the fulfillment of those Scriptures, were necessarily a prophecy that Jesus would die “not for the [*Jewish*] nation only, but in order that He might also **gather** [*synago*] together into one the children of God who are **scattered** [*diaskorpizo*] abroad.” In the Old Testament, those who were “*scattered*” were the *Jews* of the dispersion and it was these *Jews*, also, who would one day be “*gathered*” again as one.

- Jeremiah 23:2–3 — Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who care for my people: “You have **scattered** [*diaskorpizo*] my flock and have driven them away... Behold... I will **gather** the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold...
- Ezekiel 34:12–13 — As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been **scattered**, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been **scattered** [*diaspeiro*] on a day of clouds and thick darkness. And I will bring them out from the peoples and **gather** [*synago*] them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land.

The New Testament writers saw in this gathering of the dispersed and scattered sheep of Israel a **gathering**, too, of God’s chosen and elect Gentiles who were **scattered** abroad among all the nations (cf. 12:32; 1 Pet. 2:9-10 & Hos. 1:10-11; 2:23). Listen to what God said through the prophet Isaiah:

- Isaiah 56:6–8 (cf. Jn. 10:16) — “The foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant— these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” The Lord GOD, who **gathers** [*synago*] the **outcasts** [**scattered ones**; *diaspeiro*] of Israel, declares, “I will **gather** [*synago*] yet others to him besides those already **gathered** [*synagoge*].”

God said that in gathering the scattered sheep of Israel, He would also gather “*to Israel*” a multitude of chosen and elect Gentiles so that together with the Jews they might be “*one*” redeemed and holy nation. The Old Covenant set ethnic Israel apart as a holy nation—not in *substance*, but as a shadow and type of the true holiness of the heart – *a holiness that transcends all ethnic boundaries* (cf. Acts 10:34-35; Eph. 2:19). And so the Apostle Peter can write of God’s New Covenant Israel in the church:

- 1 Peter 2:9–10 (cf. Hos. 1:10-11; 2:23) — **You** are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a **holy nation**, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

It’s for *this* holy nation that Jesus would die. Jesus will die in order that *this* chosen people—elect from all the nations of the earth—might be gathered into one as a truly *holy nation* – in order that they might not perish but have eternal life (cf. Heb. 9:11–14; 10:8–14). And so Jesus Himself will say in the very next chapter:

- John 12:32 — And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw [and thereby *gather*] *all* people [people from all the nations of the earth] to myself.

When Caiaphas says to all the members of the Sanhedrin, “You know nothing at all, nor do you take into account that it is expedient for you that one man die for the people, and that the whole nation not perish,” what do we hear? We hear a wicked man, in the very act of expressing that wickedness and at the very council that will choose the death sentence for Jesus, prophesying the saving, redeeming work of God in Jesus Christ – not only for the Jews but for all the nations.

And here’s another wonder—That this wicked man who unwittingly prophesies Christ’s *sacrificial* and *substitutionary* death should be the very one who was high *priest* that year (John strongly emphasizes this in verses 49 & 51). It’s *this high priest*, in his wickedness and at the very counsel that will choose the death sentence for Jesus, who we hear prophesying the “once for all” sacrifice of this same Jesus (cf. Heb. 7:27; 10:10), so that because of His death, we might not perish but live. And so we see in this, in a way that staggers not just our minds but our hearts as well, the awesome, all-encompassing sovereignty of God. We see in this how even in the most wicked men and in the most wicked deeds of men, God is on His throne meting out His righteous judgments and accomplishing all His saving purposes. And so it’s in the full light of this

awesome reality that John is content to summarize the result of the council in these words (cf. Ridderbos):

VI. John 11:53 — So from that day on they planned together to kill Him.

The awesome fact of God's sovereignty and of His redeeming, saving purposes doesn't in any way lessen the evil of this plan or the final accountability of those who have made it and who will carry it out. One day the Romans will come and the temple will be destroyed and the nation will perish in the destruction of Jerusalem. And yet God will use these wicked men and their evil plan to accomplish *His* plan for the salvation of the world – so that because of Jesus' sacrificial death in their place, God's elect and chosen people from all the nations might not perish but have eternal life.

VII. John 11:54 — Therefore [when Jesus knew that they “officially” planned to kill Him] Jesus no longer continued to walk publicly among the Jews, but went away from there to the country near the wilderness, into a city called Ephraim; and there He stayed with the disciples.

Jesus will not be the helpless victim of a murderous counsel. Jesus will not die at the whim of any man or of any group of men – no matter how powerful. Jesus will go up to Jerusalem in His own time and His own way and lay down His own life for us – to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. And so we read in verses 55-57:

VIII. John 11:55–57 — Now the *Passover* of the Jews was near, and many went up to Jerusalem out of the country before the Passover to purify themselves. So they were seeking for Jesus, and were saying to one another as they stood in the temple, “What do you think; that He will not come to the feast at all?” Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that if anyone knew where He was, he was to report it, so that they might seize Him.

Jesus will not be the helpless victim of a murderous counsel. Jesus will not die at the whim of any man or of any group of men. Even as Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, prophesied: Jesus will go up to Jerusalem in His own time and His own way and lay down His own life for us as our *Passover sacrifice* (cf. 1 Cor. 5:7).