

ONE MAN TO DIE

John 11:45-57

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“But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all. Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish” (Jn. 11:49-50).

Great events usually produce differing reactions among different people. When the hijacked airliners brought down the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001, Americans grieved while others, far away, danced in the streets. The reactions depended on the peoples’ relationship to those involved and their attitude towards what happened. Presidential elections also produce differing reactions. One side wins and begins planning its agenda, while the losers lament and begin planning to derail the new administration.

Jesus’ miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead was this kind of polarizing event. At a time of already heightened tension, Lazarus’ resurrection raised the stakes; the Jews must either receive Jesus as the Savior or harden their opposition. John reports that some of both took place: “Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him, but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done” (Jn. 11:45-46).

A CYNICAL COUNCIL

When we consider the actions of those who did not believe we gain a stark portrait of unbelief. We sometimes wonder how people we know who have heard the gospel can continue in unbelief. But as John relates to us a meeting of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council, to deliberate what to do about Jesus, we see

how deeply-seated the sin of unbelief can be. It is a condition that can only be overcome by the saving grace of God.

Some who had observed the raising of Lazarus went to the religious leaders: “So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the Council and said, ‘What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him’” (Jn. 11:47). Here were the best men of the nation – at least those elevated to the highest religious and political office – the chief priests, the Sadducees, and the Pharisees, the men most devoted to holiness. No doubt, they opened their meeting in prayer. Yet the purpose of their meeting was to oppose the growing popularity of Jesus. No charge was made against his actions, and none denied the miracles he had displayed. We might expect them to consider how to support his work and encourage people to follow him. But instead we find a most cynical council determined to thwart Jesus’ mission.

The Sanhedrin saw the fact of Jesus’ miracles as a great problem: “What are we to do? For this man performs many signs” (Jn. 11:47). Earlier, they might have questioned the authenticity of Jesus’ miracles. But now they no longer doubt. One would not think it a problem for a holy man to appear who could heal the sick and raise the dead. The reason it was a problem was that Jesus’ manifest spiritual authority unmasked their own illegitimacy as spiritual leaders. These men were interested mainly in maintaining their own privileged positions. “If we let him go on like this,” they reasoned, “everyone will believe in him” (Jn. 11:48). The implication was that the people would no longer look to them for spiritual leadership.

There was also an implicit threat that they saw darkening the situation. Jesus’ arrival might cause a religious uproar, and their Roman masters disliked uproars of all kinds. Therefore, they worried, “the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation” (Jn. 11:48). By place, they may mean the temple, although they may also mean their own privileged positions, which were granted by the Roman governor. By “our nation,” they meant the limited self-government they enjoyed. Bruce Milne explains: “Jesus clearly had much support among the masses, and that was likely to grow rather than diminish. The outcome could well be an abortive popular rising which the Romans would speedily and ruthlessly put down, and in the

process impose direct rule, with possible further desecration, if not destruction, of the temple.”¹

How should we evaluate this cynical council of the Sanhedrin? First, they had come to rely on worldly powers rather than on God’s power. These men were the guardians of the ancient Jewish faith, which looked back on God’s deliverance in parting the Red Sea, fondly remembered David slaying Goliath, and applauded Elijah for his victories in God’s power, including the raising of the dead. They were happy to teach these things, but when it came to their own situation they thought differently. Jesus had come, displaying the power of God, yet they opposed him for fear of Roman swords. Gordon Keddie says of them: “God and Scripture did not figure at all in [their] reasoning. There was no appeal to truth, no evidence of spiritual commitment to the God of their fathers, but only policy and politics, power and position... There was, in fact, no place for truth.”²

They further show that religious people are sometimes Jesus’ most bitter opponents. The Sadducees and Pharisees were enemies, yet they banded together against Jesus. They represent the kind of religion that is interested in erecting financial and political empires but little concerned with real saving power. Jesus is always a threat to such religion. Jesus demands a radical commitment to the Word and power of God. He calls us to risk losing everything in this world for the sake of his kingdom; indeed, he calls us to take up the cross, die to sin and self, and follow him. That is a very different kind of religion from that with which most people are comfortable. This same kind of opposition that Jesus received is encountered whenever sin and the cross are preached, as well as the radical calling of Christian discipleship, which relies on God’s power alone. If we want earthly ease from our religion, we will likely take the view of the Sanhedrin. But if we crave for the salvation that God gives, we will look on Jesus as a Messiah, rather than a threat to our lifestyle.

How do we preserve ourselves from this cynical pragmatism of the Jewish leaders? One way is to resolve always to obey the commands of God’s Word. If we find ourselves rationalizing sin or compromise,

¹ Bruce Milne, *The Message of John: Here Is Your King!* (Downers Grove, Ill: Inter-Varsity, 1993), 173.

² Gordon J. Keddie, *A Study Commentary on John*, 2 vols. (location: Evangelical Press,), I:441.

as these men did, we can be sure we have gone astray. Another way is always to have in mind God's saving mission in the world. In time of the Sanhedrin, they knew that God had promised to send the Messiah; their first concern, then, should have been to recognize and support him when he came. In our time, God has promised to send forth his gospel and draw many to salvation. Whatever else we are seeking to promote, our first passion should be that we uphold and preach the good news of Jesus for the saving of souls.

If the attitude of the Sanhedrin is a challenge to religious unbelievers, it is no less a challenge to irreligious unbelievers. Many people avoid the gospel not because they expect that it is false but, like the Sanhedrin, because they suspect it is true. James Boice tells of a woman who was invited to attend a gospel meeting. She answered, "I am afraid to go for fear I will get converted." On another occasion, a minister asked this wife why her husband had been absent from church. "Well," she said, "he is afraid to come; for when he comes and hears the Word, it takes him nearly two weeks to get over it."³ But the thing for us to get over is unbelief! The gospel offers to make us right with God and enter us into a changed life of holiness and blessing. If you fear to lose your unbelief, then you are as cynical and foolish as these Jewish leaders.

A CHILLING PROPHECY

Every group of this sort has a key leader who will either confront or reinforce its unbelief. The Sanhedrin's leader was the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas. He rebuked the others for their panicked thinking. "You know nothing at all," he stated. "Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish" (Jn. 11:50). There it was, the chilling conclusion to their cynical reasoning.

Caiaphas was a clear-eyed pragmatist. He knew that "sometimes one has to put up with a lesser evil to prevent a larger one, here the death of one for the sake of the nation as a whole."⁴ In those days, the high priest was expected to collaborate with the Romans, since it was the

³ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 3:900.

⁴ Herman Ridderbos, *John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 409.

Roman governor who put him into office. But perhaps Caiaphas was sincerely concerned that the temple not be desecrated, not knowing that the temple was a picture of Jesus, God incarnate, and not realizing that the greatest desecration was the one he was about to commit. John provides the chilling conclusion of his reasoning: “So from that day on they made plans to put [Jesus] to death” (Jn. 11:53)

Even if we put the best possible construction on Caiaphas’ motives, his method was entirely wrong. His calling was to fear God rather than the Romans. His duty was to uphold justice, not to sacrifice it on the altar of politics. For these very reasons, he failed miserably. By putting Jesus to death, Caiaphas did not secure Jerusalem’s safety but ensured its destruction. Having rejected the true Messiah, the Jews went on to follow false Messiahs who led them in revolt against Rome, with the result of Jerusalem’s bloody destruction in A.D. 70. William Barclay writes, “The very steps they took to save their nation destroyed their nation.”⁵

The history lesson provided by Caiaphas is that it never pays to oppose God. Boice comments: “You cannot frustrate God. You can oppose him, but only you will pay the consequences, as did these men. You may oppose him, but Christianity will spread. The Bible says, ‘Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will be established’ (Prov. 19:21 RSV).”⁶

That God’s power was at work to overturn the evil counsel of these false leaders is evident in what John goes on to say: “He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation” (Jn. 11:51). In the greatest irony, Caiaphas had spoken the truth, although with a meaning he neither intended nor understood.

Caiaphas spoke, by the overruling providence of God, a great answer to the greatest question: Why did Jesus Christ die? Answers to this question are found all through the Bible, since the purpose of the Bible is to point to Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. One answer is given by the Old Testament sacrificial system, which called for spotless lambs to be sacrificed for human sin. An answer was given

⁵ William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 2:122.

⁶ Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 3:901.

in the Passover feast, which Caiaphas and the Jews were even then preparing to observe. This remembered the night of Israel's deliverance from Egypt. The angel of death came to slay all the first-born sons. But God's people spread the blood of a sacrificed lamb over their doors; seeing this, the angel of the Lord's wrath "passed over" and spared them. Other answers were given by the prophets and in the New Testament there are doctrinal explanations. But there are few short explanations of the cross as accurate as that spoken by the high priest Caiaphas: "One man should die for the people" (Jn. 11:50).

With these words, Caiaphas prophesied the nature of Jesus' atoning death: it was a vicarious sacrifice. The word "vicarious" signifies that Jesus died in the place of others. The word "sacrifice" means that he gave himself in payment for their sins. James Boice writes: "It was Christ taking their place, dying in their stead, taking upon himself the guilt and punishment of their sins, in order that there might be nothing left for them but God's heaven."⁷ Isaiah had explained, "He was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isa. 53:5-6).

This is a teaching that many find offensive; they object to be told that they can only be made right with God by Jesus dying on the cross in their place. But their objection fails to realize the true gravity of sin. This is the true reason why "one man should die for the people" – not to spare them the vengeance of the Romans but to spare them the righteous wrath of God. Most of us treat sin lightly, but it is not possible for God to do so, because God is holy and his justice is perfect. I have been told by many who reject the cross, "My God is a God of love, not of judgment." But it is precisely the God of love who takes such offense at our hating, lying, stealing, and betraying. God is love. And it is also true that "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all" (1 Jn. 1:5). Whether we take our sin seriously or not, the Bible is clear in stating that "The wrath of God is revealed from

⁷ Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 3:905.

heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men” (Rom. 1:18).

There are others who call the idea that Jesus died to pay for our sins an immoral teaching, since God thus punishes his innocent son. But this objection fails to realize just who Jesus is. Jesus is God the Son. J. Gresham Machen said, “It is perfectly true that no mere man can pay the penalty of another man’s sin. But it does not follow that Jesus could not do it; for Jesus was not mere man but the eternal Son of God... The Christian doctrine of the atonement, therefore, is altogether rooted in the Christian doctrine of the deity of Christ.”⁸ In the mystery of the Godhead, not only did God the Father give his only Son, but God the Trinity suffered self-sacrifice to redeem lost sinners. In the perfect unity of wills between Jesus the Son and God the Father was a loving resolve to free us from our sins. Therefore, one writer states:

[Jesus] offered himself as a sacrifice in our stead, bearing our sin in his own body on the tree. He suffered, not only awful physical anguish, but also the unthinkable spiritual horror of becoming identified with the sin to which he was infinitely opposed. He thereby came under the curse of sin, so that for a time even his perfect fellowship with his Father was broken. Thus God proclaimed his infinite abhorrence of sin by being willing himself to suffer all that, in place of the guilty ones, in order that he might justly forgive. Thus the love of God found its perfect fulfillment, because he did not hold back from even that uttermost sacrifice, in order that we might be saved from eternal death through what he endured.⁹

Caiaphas’ prophecy further shows that Christ’s death was a definite atonement. Jesus died not just to make salvation possible for all – although the value of his death is sufficient for all – but actually to redeem “the people” of God. The definite article shows that it was a definite group of people for whom Jesus died. He died, John says, “to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad” (Jn. 11:52). Notice how John puts this. He does not say that whoever believes becomes a child of God wherever they live, though this is true. But in keeping with the strong emphasis on the doctrine of election in this Gospel, John tells us that scattered throughout this

⁸ J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity & Liberalism*, 126.

⁹ H. E. Guillebaud, *Why the Cross?* (Chicago: InterVarsity, 1947), 185.

world and through the ages of this world are “the children of God.” They are the ones Jesus earlier identified as those whom “the Father has given me” (Jn. 6:37, 39), for whom he therefore died, and who thus are brought to faith by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.

The glorious consequences of Jesus’ death were far beyond Caiaphas’ imagining. To the high priest, this was a sordid, though sadly necessary, affair. But God reveals it as an act of amazing grace. By his death, Jesus not only redeems but gathers his flock throughout the world. This is why the atoning sacrifice of Christ is the chief and most beloved doctrine of all true Christians. Whereas Caiaphas sought to preserve the temple as the holy gathering place for the Jews, Jesus has erected his cross as the great gathering point where God’s children from every tribe and tongue come to meet with God, worship, and receive his saving blessings.

A CROWD DIVIDED

The final verses of John 11 bring to a conclusion the first half of this Gospel, often named *The Book of Signs* for its focus on Jesus’ miracles. It is a fitting conclusion, for it shows the three parties on whom its message focuses: Jesus and his disciples, the uncommitted crowd, and the hostile religious leaders.

First, we see Jesus. John says he “therefore no longer walked openly among the Jews, but went from there to the region near the wilderness, to a town called Ephraim, and there he stayed with the disciples” (Jn. 11:54). Jesus was preparing himself and his disciples for what he knew was soon to come. He knew what was being plotted against him; he is, as always, master of the situation, never surprised by the works of man. Jesus provides the exact contrast to his ungodly opponents. While they were willing to break God’s command to avoid difficulty, Jesus embraces the most fearful trial in obedience to God’s will. Trusting in God, he courageously faces what lies before him, unwilling to leave his calling and duty undone.

Then we have the undecided crowds. John says, “Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and many went up from the country to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify themselves. They were looking for Jesus and saying to one another as they stood in the

temple, ‘What do you think? That he will not come to the feast at all?’” (Jn. 11:55-56). While performing their ritual purification, they failed to appreciate the defilement that was about to happen. Boice writes, “They were content merely to observe the outcome, which they knew well meant the execution of a perfectly innocent man.”¹⁰

Lastly, we observe the religious leaders, of whom John writes: “Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that if anyone knew where he was, he should let them know, so that they might arrest him” (Jn. 11:57). Their plans were laid, and they merely awaited Jesus’ arrival to spring into action.

All of this presents a vital question for us. The crowds asked, “What do you think?” and the question now comes to us. The religious leaders, noting Jesus’ mighty signs, asked, “What are we to do?” (Jn. 11:47), and this question comes now to us as well.

There really are only three options, illustrated by these groups. First, like the crowd, you can avoid taking a position on Jesus, as many people do today. But the problem now is the same as the problem then: the evidence for Jesus is simply too strong. Any honest assessment of the facts of Jesus’ life will see proof that he is the Son of God, just as the facts of his death and resurrection prove him as the Savior of the world. You can ignore him and maintain the status quo of your life, but the facts of Jesus will not go away. Especially in death, you will face your disinterest in Jesus. He said, “Unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins” (Jn. 8:24). And how will you ignore Jesus on that great day to come, of which the Bible speaks, when every knee shall bow “and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:11)?

Secondly, you can oppose Jesus, as Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin did. But in doing so, you will join the ranks of history’s great losers. History is filled with the record of those who opposed Jesus and his gospel. All of them are gone, but his church and gospel remain. You can oppose Jesus, but can you really hope to be successful? By opposing Jesus and his gospel, you will only join the lamentable company of those condemned in God’s Word, who “take counsel together, against the LORD and against his anointed.” The Bible says,

¹⁰ Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 3:910.

“He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision”
(Ps. 2:2-4).

If we understand who Jesus really is, as the rulers did, or if we have heard the Bible’s report of him, as did the crowds in that day, there is only one sensible option: to believe on Jesus and follow him. But, you object, “This will mean surrendering my lifestyle to Jesus!” Indeed, it will, for Jesus is Savior only to those who take him as Lord. He will summon you to the cross, and by losing your life you will gain it in resurrection triumph. You will be neither a victim of history, as the crowds were, nor an enemy to history, as were the religious leaders. Instead, you will be a beneficiary of God’s saving plan for history through the life and death of his only Son. Your life will gain a real significance and in the end Jesus will receive you into everlasting glory.